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From Miss Post

"OH, THAT'S NOT A NAME!"

NANCY LEE'S NAMESAKE

By

MARGARET WARDE

Author of

"NANCY LEE"

"NANCY LEE'S SPRING TERM"

"NANCY LEE'S LOOKOUT"

THE "BETTY WALES' BOOKS," ETC.

Illustrated by

PEMBERTON GINTHER

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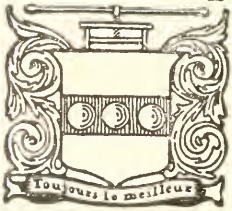

Nancy Lee's Namesake

Introduction

When I first knew Nancy Lee she was just a pretty irresponsible schoolgirl. Everybody liked her, and she was always at the centre of all the fun there was going; but she was so careless, so heedless of her responsibilities, that her nickname among her friends was "Miss I-Forget." Her particular chums during her first year at Fair Oaks School were the Learned twins—the Terrible Twins, they proudly called themselves, because their escapades had been the talk of several boarding-schools before Fair Oaks. At Fair Oaks there always seemed to be plenty of things besides silly scrapes for lively girls to think about. "Nancy Lee's Spring Term," which comes after "Nancy Lee," tells the story of the greatest excitement of the school year. His name was Timmy Lee Marshall Raftery. Careless Nancy Lee found him—had him presented to her, as it were—and she passed him on to Fair Oaks School, which learned more from Timmy than from many books, and had only fun doing it.

After the spring-term story came "Nancy Lee's Lookout." The Lookout was a sort of summer

castle-in-the-air—really up in the air, you know, on the edge of a cliff, in the grove back of the Lees' seaside cottage. Nancy saw all sorts of things from her Lookout, some gay and some very sad ones. She had to sit still for once, you see, because she had carelessly sprained her ankle; but instead of spoiling her summer that ankle was responsible for Nancy's having the Lookout game, which is the very best game in the world, as you know if you ever played it.

All this time Nancy was growing up, though she didn't realize it. In this book you will find her changed, in the mysterious way that girls do change, from a jolly little girl to a charming young woman. At least I hope you will find her charming. As for her comical little Namesake, I like her as well as any girl I know. Anyhow she is "different." Read about her and see what you think.

MARGARET WARDE.

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Nancy Lee's Namesake

CHAPTER I

GROWING UP

"Oh, you darling Nancy!"

"Hello there, N. Lee!"

Nancy Lee, lugging a suit-case, full of all the things that wouldn't go into her trunk, up to the second floor of the Senior House at Fair Oaks School, looked, first, down to see little Christina Learned smiling up at her from the lower hall, and then up to the third floor, where tall Jane Learned hung draped over the stair-rail, grinning delightedly. It was "come-back day" for the fall term, and Nancy Lee, having had only three days at home between her adventurous summer at the seashore and the opening of the school year, had taken the last available train that would get her up to Fair Oaks before dark. The twins, and most of the other seniors, had therefore arrived ahead of her.

"Awfully glad to see you, twins," said Nancy, dropping her heavy bag on a stair. "Is the Unmixed Study up or down? I'm in ten, on the

second floor, but I can't unpack to amount to anything before dinner, so I'll just dump my belongings and then come and talk to you while I tidy up a bit."

"Isn't any Unmixed Study," explained Jane curtly. "I'm in a horrid mess up here, but come along and do your prinking all the same."

"We're even on different floors, Nancy," mourned little Christina. "Come down and use my dressing-table. I'm fairly well settled."

"We tried to make 'em put us side by side," Jane took up the tale of woe, "but they wouldn't. We'd have used one room for beds and the other for a sitting-room then, and the Unmixed Study would have been the soul and centre of the Senior House."

"And they didn't want it to be," concluded little Christina. "They say we're too gregarious." She got out the long word slowly.

"Whereas," amended Jane, "it's the rest of you that are gregarious on our premises. We aren't specially gregarious, but we're very specially twins, and if they think two flights of stairs between us can alter that they should—watch me!"

In a flash Jane was astride the baluster, down one flight, across the little landing, and down the other, giving Nancy a sort of motion-picture hug as she flew by her.

"Jane!" reproached Christina, dodging as the tall twin vaulted to the floor.

"Not my fault," Jane announced calmly. "Bad management on the part of the authorities. Hurry right down, N. Lee. There's lots of news."

At the door of number ten Nancy met Kittie Westervelt, more frilly and becurled than ever, if possible.

"We're next-door neighbors, Nancy dear," gushed Kittie joyously. "I'm so glad."

"So am I," returned Nancy cordially. Kittie was silly but otherwise harmless.

"You see, Mildred Wallace and Lloyd Mallory are on this hall," pursued Kittie, "and Plain Mary Smith. They're all *so* unsympathetic."

Nancy opened her door, laughing at Kittie's plaintive air. "I like them all, Kittie," she said.

"Oh, so do I," explained Kittie hastily, "in a way. But they're so young and inexperienced. What do they know about love? I'm engaged, Nancy, to the *dearest* man. Look!" She opened a locket to display the picture inside. "Mother doesn't approve of schoolgirls wearing valuable rings," went on Kittie sententiously, "but she thoroughly approves of Lewis. We'll probably be married next summer. He writes to me every single day."

"I can't imagine loving anybody enough to

write letters at that rate," laughed Nancy. "Do you answer them all? Then I can't see the use of your coming back here; you won't have any time for lessons." Nancy dropped her bag again and shook both Kittie's hands. "I'm not really unsympathetic, Kittie," she explained. "I hope you'll be awfully happy. But—don't you hate to grow up so soon?"

Nancy stayed in number ten only long enough to observe that it was very small and its view was completely blocked by the gymnasium wing of the main school building. Then she hurried down to the waiting twins.

"Margaret Lewis isn't back," Christina told her.

"Oh, dear!" wailed Nancy. "Couldn't her father and little brothers manage without her?"

"She says not," Jane announced, "in a letter she wrote to the Triangle, and I'll give it to you after dinner, if I can find it. She says not, but the Terrible Twins think there's somebody else out there that has persuaded her he can't manage without her, and that's what's keeping our Maggie Lou. We think she's in love."

Nancy leaned back disconsolately on Christina's couch. "Margaret Lewis in love and Kittie engaged! It makes me feel just terribly old. Why, I don't want to be as grown-up as love affairs—not for ages yet."

"Of course not," agreed Jane placidly. "Maybe never."

Nancy dimpled. "Never's a pretty long time. How's little Sarah?"

"Not back," said Jane. "Her invalid mother's taken a new lease of life, it seems. Different doctor or different medicine or something. Mildred Wallace met little Sarah out walking with her mother somewhere this summer and said she was the happiest kiddie you can imagine."

"And Jeanne is as brown as an Indian," contributed Christina, "and almost fat, after her summer at the ranch with Lloyd. But she's in trouble now. Her uncle has gone over to fight for France. Miss Marshall has asked Jeanne to stay on here and help Mademoiselle with the beginners, so she's provided for through this year, but of course she's pretty blue about her uncle and the war and all."

"She is the only waif-and-stray we have left, isn't she?" Nancy reflected. "And we can't do much for her. Her big trouble is something we can't help about, and Lloyd looks after her in other ways, now that they're such good friends."

"See here, N. Lee," began Jane severely, "you aren't thinking of playing your Lookout game here, are you? Remember, you're no longer on a vacation. You're no longer an interesting invalid

with nothing to do but sit in a Birdcage and stare at the ocean and amuse yourself with other people's business. You're a Fair Oaks senior—with your trunk to unpack."

"Goodness, Jane! How you do pounce on a person!" laughed Nancy. "I know that the seniors are expected to work hard, and I mean to. I want to!"

"Yes," put in Christina, "from all we've heard about how stiff the senior work is, I imagine we shan't have much time this year for waifs-and-strays."

"I'm going in for athletics too," announced Nancy. "And I'm going to do things up right—whatever I undertake. After not doing anything much this summer, I ought to feel all the more like pitching in hard now."

"But you won't," said Jane wisely. "You'll feel a lot less like it."

Nancy made a scornful face of disbelief at Jane and inquired if any one had late news of Timmy. Miss Dutton had, it seemed, having stopped at Pine Ridge, Michigan, at the end of her lake cruise with the Watsons.

"She says that Timmy is sweeter than ever," said Christina, "and his father is so proud of him that he works now as hard as he used to smile, and smiles harder than ever. He's been made a

foreman already, and Miss Dutton thinks he'll rise fast. So Timmy won't be needing much of us, probably."

"Which is fortunate, according to Jane, but I'm sorry," cried Nancy, hurrying off to intercept Grace Allen's progress through the hall to dinner.

"Too bad you're not on my floor," said Nancy, just to be agreeable.

To her astonishment, undemonstrative Grace put both arms around her ex-roommate and kissed her. "I wish I were," she said, "but I haven't been very well this summer, you know. Stairs aren't good for me."

"That's too bad," said Nancy briskly. Secretly she was glad that there were no doubles in the Senior House, and not especially sorry that Grace's quarters were down-stairs. Grace had improved a great deal since Jane nicknamed her "Grouchy Grace," but she was still an "all-or-nothing" kind of girl, and now if she was going to begin worrying about her health ——

"Oh, Nancy, wait for me!" It was Plain Mary Smith lumbering down the stairs. She was still fat and awkward but she looked so happy and so thoroughly alive that her plainness was now the last thing one thought about.

"I've lost eight pounds, Nancy," cried Mary, hugging her friend. "I've learned to swim on

my side—the Australian crawl is the name of the stroke—and to run Doctor Jim's car. And Mrs. Jim said she loved me," ended Mary, whispering it in Nancy's ear, " and she sent lots of love to you and Lloyd."

Dinner was very noisy, and it was over sooner than usual, because the girls were all in a hurry to get back to their interrupted unpacking. Nancy, who had not begun hers, sat for a long time in the low window-seat of number ten, pretending to herself that she was deciding how to arrange her belongings. But really she was thinking how much she should miss little Sarah and Margaret Lewis and Billy Bray, who had had number ten last year, and Jimmy and the Princess, who was now Mrs. Jim. And in place of all these interests of last year, in place of the fascinating Lookout game of the summer, there was going to be—what? The new girls all seemed very young and quite uninteresting, except one, perhaps,—Phyllis Knight, a senior, who roomed next to Jane Learned. She was slim and dark and had the brightest, blackest eyes imaginable, and a sweet, deep voice. She might be fun to know. But the big thing to do with this year, Nancy reflected, was to make the most of all its opportunities for study. Probably it would be her last year of school.

"And I don't know anything!" thought Nancy despairingly. "I can't read French easily. I'm a terrible ignoramus about pictures and periods of art. I love history, but I'm vague about most of it. And then all the lovely things there are to read in English literature—I can read and study later, of course, but I must make a big beginning this year. And I shall be fairly distracted to-morrow trying to arrange my classes and settle my room, if I don't unpack to-night."

Nancy jumped at her trunk and began pulling things out, hanging things up in the closet, and laying them away in drawers and window-box. She worked with such energy that at nine o'clock she flung herself on the bed, quite exhausted, and in five minutes she was so soundly asleep that neither the before-bedtime commotion in the halls nor the "lights out" gong woke her. There Miss MacPherson, mistress of games and head of the Senior House, found her when she made her bedtime round. Nancy woke with a start when Miss MacPherson touched her shoulder gently.

"Oh, what time is it?" she demanded, sitting up and rubbing her eyes. "I—I must have fallen asleep."

Smilingly Miss MacPherson agreed to that.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Nancy. "You see I packed up this morning in a grand rush, and I unpacked

to-night, so as to get a good start for to-morrow. I certainly didn't mean to bother you, Miss MacPherson. I've made the grandest resolves for doing things up right this year. But now—I suppose it's horribly careless to fall asleep on top of the bed, with the lights all going full blast."

Nancy lifted her troubled grey eyes to Miss MacPherson's face, and was startled to notice how thin and worn and pale the little Scotch teacher looked. She was in deep mourning too; the girls had commented on that at dinner, wondering why. Impulsively Nancy reached up to touch Miss MacPherson's black sleeve.

"I'm sorry," she said. "We're all sorry. Was it ——"

"My brother," Miss MacPherson told her, "the youngest. He died bravely, 'somewhere in France,' so I shouldn't grieve for him. I try not to. But I've been working in a London hospital all summer, and the ship I started back on struck a mine. So I've only just arrived, and I'm tired, and it's a great change to be here."

"A change from real work that counts, to bothering with silly, careless girls," supplemented Nancy. "We'll try to make things as easy for you as we can, I promise you, Miss MacPherson. You knew about Jeanne's uncle?"

Miss MacPherson nodded. "And she's two

brothers fighting. Well, I've two left to match them."

"When we had war news in current events last year," said Nancy, "it seemed far away—like history battles. But now it's right in our midst," she ended quaintly.

Very solemnly Nancy undressed, when Miss MacPherson had gone. Love and war, brothers fighting and dying in France, lovers writing every day, big sorrows, grown-up responsibilities: these things were coming to other girls. Soon they might come to Nancy Lee. Miss MacPherson was only a girl herself; Kittie and Margaret and Jeanne were just Nancy's age.

"I've got to be ready," thought Nancy, as she lay staring out into the dark. "I don't feel ready to be grown up. I must study hard and try to be ready." Then a soft chuckle broke the dusky stillness of Nancy's little room. If there was a flighty, scatter-brained, irresponsible girl at Fair Oaks, that girl was Kittie Westervelt. But Kittie wasn't worrying about assuming adult responsibilities. Nancy went to sleep smiling over Kittie's intrepidity.

Next morning Nancy told Plain Mary and Lloyd and Jane about Miss MacPherson's mourning, and they passed the word along. Trouble like that pledged the Senior House to spe-

cial courtesy, special thoughtfulness toward its head.

"Maybe it's a good thing that the Unmixed Study is no more," said Jane Learned. "Now if you want a place to be gregarious and cook up scrapes in, you can't blame it on us twins."

The new girl, Phyllis Knight, was listening. "Are you Learned sisters twins?" she demanded. "You don't look alike or dress alike or ——"

"Don't have to," Jane cut her off, "because we're so twinny. I'm the long of it and Christina's the short of it. We don't look alike or dress alike. We never think alike—couldn't, because I generally have to do the thinking for both of us. But ——"

"Not a bit conceited, are you, tall twin?" cut in Phyllis Knight, smiling at Jane rather disagreeably.

"If I am," said Jane coolly, "I'm conceited for two. We twins do whatever we do together."

"Well, and what do you do?" challenged Phyllis.

"Oh, keep things lively around where we are," said Jane with a shrug.

"Then I shall tag the twins," announced Phyllis, still smiling her ironical little smile. "I like a lively time. Besides, I've always wanted to know more about this attraction of opposites that you hear so much of."

"If you tag us, you'll see it working both ways," Jane told her serenely.

"I wonder if I shall," said Phyllis Knight with an unfriendly flash of her black eyes. Jane's calm confidence in her twin's devotion was like a challenge to something in Phyllis. Jane should see how much that pretty little sister of hers really cared for her. She should find that it didn't pay to snub Phyllis Knight. For Phyllis always repaid snubs with interest, and making trouble between friends was her favorite amusement.

After dinner that evening Miss Marshall invited the seniors to her sitting-room for a conference. Miss MacPherson was there, and Miss Cripps,—because she was Miss Marshall's special assistant, the girls thought,—and Jeanne, who roomed near Mademoiselle because of her work for the French department but enjoyed all the privileges of the senior class, some of whose studies she shared. An open fire and black coffee and candies on a silver tray gave the conference an air of festivity and friendliness. And soon the girls found out exactly why Miss Cripps was there.

"I wonder if you're all missing Timmy as much as I am." Miss Marshall looked smilingly around the circle until her eyes met Nancy Lee's. "I suppose, as he's Timmy Lee Marshall Raftery, that Nancy and I are missing him most, but I'm sure

everybody here except Phyllis, who is probably sick of hearing about him ——"

Phyllis nodded insolently, as Miss Marshall paused, and Nancy decided swiftly that she shouldn't like the new senior. But Miss Marshall only laughed good-naturedly.

"I don't blame you, Phyllis," she went on, "but you must have patience with the old school idols until you have a chance to share in the new ones. Now Miss Cripps thinks that the seniors are entitled to a first hearing of her report on a substitute for Timmy."

"You won't like it," began Miss Cripps sharply. "I don't like it myself. But I feel that it's the right thing to do. America is rich and at peace. There are plenty of people to look after the American babies that need help. But over in the war zone children are starving; mothers are watching them starve. We could choose two French babies and a Belgian, under the Relief Society's plan that I hope you will adopt,—babies whose fathers are dead—and support them, with what the state gives their mothers, for two years on our fund. Otherwise they must go to some of the public orphanages. They must leave their homes and lose their mothers, and their poor mothers must lose them," concluded Miss Cripps feelingly.

"Oh, then you don't mean that we're to have

them here with us if we adopt them," sighed Mildred Wallace.

"I'm afraid no baby protégé of Fair Oaks School could stay here much of the time, Mildred," cautioned Miss Marshall. "Timmy was an exception to all rules."

"We can have the pictures of these babies," explained Miss Cripps, "and letters from their families and from Relief workers. And they need help so! War relief is so much more urgent than any other just at present."

"And the war has come so near to us now!" cried Nancy Lee impulsively. "I think war babies are just what we want. Let's take them."

"Can't we send things to the soldiers too?" asked some one.

"Why not have a Red Cross branch here?" asked some one else.

"Knitting is a useful accomplishment. We can learn to knit socks."

"Oh, beautiful grey socks for my brothers!" cried Jeanne. "And for hers!" with a smile for Miss MacPherson.

"And maybe the brothers will go and see the babies," suggested Jane, "some day when they're not too busy fighting, and write us about them with brotherly detail and frankness."

"Oh, but Jane ——" began little Christina, and

stopped shamefacedly when Jane grinned. "Well, you shouldn't joke at a senior conference," ended Christina in a severe whisper.

A committee was appointed to help Miss Cripps select war babies. Then Miss MacPherson volunteered to supervise the making of Red Cross supplies, and Miss Marshall agreed to let the sewing classes knit socks, make pajamas, roll bandages, and fold compresses, at least until Christmas.

"For when most of the world is at war," she said, "we can't keep away from the pity of it and the needs it brings. I don't want my girls to be afraid of life or to think that even these school years that belong especially to self-culture must be wholly self-centred. Our experience with Timmy last year proved to us that added responsibilities needn't interfere with regular work. I want to add still further to your responsibilities now, and I hope you'll give me another chance to be proud of you."

"We'll try, Miss Marshall," outspoken Mildred Wallace promised, and there were nods and murmurs of assent from the others.

"We have a larger proportion of new girls this year than usual," went on Miss Marshall, "and I want them to waste as little time as possible in discovering the resources of Fair Oaks School. I

want them to make wise friendships. I want them to understand the spirit of the school and to share it. You seniors—all but Phyllis—have been here a year, some of you two and three years. I'm asking you not to form a little superior clique over in your own house, but to give the new girls all the friendly help you can, especially at first when they all need it, but later, too, when some of them may need it most of all. We teachers try to keep our eyes open. I believe"—Miss Marshall smiled—"you think that at least one of us has eyes in the back of her head. But even so we can't see everything. Often you girls understand far better than we what's wrong with our little world, and how to right matters. Be helpful to all the girls you can. But in order that every new pupil may have some special friend, some special monitor, I'm going to give each of you seniors and a few juniors a name." She held out some slips of paper. "I leave it to each of you whether the girl whose name you get shall know why you take an interest in her, or whether the rest of us shall know who is your protégée. How much responsibility you assume toward her is entirely in your hands. If any of you are unwilling to try out the plan, please don't take a slip. Here, Christina, Nancy, Mildred, Mary, Lloyd, Jane."

There were no refusals, though Jane Learned's

expressive face grew blank when she read the name on her slip, and Lloyd Mallory whispered to Nancy that she just couldn't, couldn't make friends with most girls.

"I think Miss Marshall gave you one she thought you could get on with, Lloyd," said observant Nancy. "I don't think she distributed the names hit or miss. Have you seen your girl?"

"I think so," said Lloyd, "and if she's the one, she is ——"

"Don't tell me, Lloyd, until you're sure you want to," cautioned Nancy. "I haven't either seen or heard of mine, so I can't give you any hints about her."

Back in number ten, Nancy Lee unfolded her slip and read it again: "Annetta Lester."

"Now which of those stupid little first-year babies is she?" asked Nancy Lee of things in general.

CHAPTER II

DISCOVERING ANNETTA

"Miss Dutton will take some of us tramping this afternoon, to get berries for our senior sitting-room." Lloyd Mallory stopped at Nancy's door to make her announcement.

"Thanks, but Christina and I had planned to play tennis," rejoined Nancy. "Are there plenty of people to get the berries?"

Lloyd made a comical face over that. "We just want a good big bunch for the Japanese jar on the table. I saw some lovely coral red ones as I came in on the train, that Miss Dutton thinks were bittersweet. Isn't it a pretty name? You know I promised her not to go walking alone—the silliest idea!" sniffed Lloyd. "And as the regular afternoon sports aren't fully organized yet, she told me to give the rest of you a chance for exercise with us."

"And you're secretly hoping that nobody else will come," laughed Nancy, "so you two can go as fast and as far as you like. Well, in that case I shall certainly stick to tennis."

Lloyd left the door ajar when she went out, and

Nancy, changing into tennis clothes, heard her knock on Kittie's door and repeat her invitation.

"Thank you, Lloyd," said Kittie, "I believe I'll come. I feel tired and headachy, and the air may refresh me. Besides, Lewis is very fond of walking and I've planned to get into training here."

"It's swampy where the berries are, so you'd better wear old shoes. We meet down-stairs in ten minutes."

Nancy chuckled over Lloyd's polite attempt to discourage Kittie. In a case where her Lewis was involved, discouraging Kittie was a difficult job, but a mile or so of fast walking would do it effectually. As the bittersweet Lloyd had seen was at least three miles off, somebody was doomed to unhappiness. Nancy hoped it wouldn't be Lloyd, all eagerness to gather the red berries that were new to her, and started off for her tennis. As she stooped to pick up her racquet, her eye fell on a scrap of paper that had fallen from her desk to the floor. It was the slip Miss Marshall had given her with Annetta Lester's name on it—the name of the girl she was to be friends with. And she had let a whole day go by without even hunting her up! To be sure, she had asked one or two girls if a Miss Lester sat at their table, and none of them knew her. The quickest way to reach her, Nancy decided, was to speak to Miss Marshall. She would

do so before dinner, and then after dinner, when the girls gathered in the gym for dancing, she could begin making friends.

The tennis game was a failure. That queer new girl, Phyllis Knight, had asked Christina to play with her, it seemed; and when Christina pleaded a previous engagement with Nancy, Phyllis came over to the courts with her racquet and hung around till they asked her to play. Nancy hated playing with three. Phyllis Knight lobbed a lot, which was another thing Nancy disliked. Worst of all, Christina didn't seem to care.

"It's just as good practice playing three," she said, "and isn't Phyllis graceful? I love to watch her get around the court."

When Phyllis finally announced that she must stop and write home before dinner, Christina remembered that she also must write home.

"It's much too lovely an afternoon to go in yet," objected Nancy, who felt injured. "I shall walk down to the wharf. Maybe I can get a canoe."

Phyllis Knight's dark eyes sparkled. "I believe I'll put off my letter until evening," she said, "and come too. I love boating."

"You can't canoe here till you've passed the swimming test," Nancy informed her loftily, and went off without giving Christina a chance to say if she too had changed her mind about letters.

Of course there was no canoe. Nancy had as good as known they would all be in use on such a lovely day. She sat down rather forlornly on a rustic bench by the lake, digging aimlessly at the gravel walk with her racquet and wishing something amusing would turn up before dinner. Presently something did turn up, appearing in the unpromising guise of Kittie Westervelt, limping badly, and Plain Mary Smith, looking as cross as Nancy felt.

Nancy guessed at once what had happened; Kittie had fallen by the wayside, as she always did on long walks, and Plain Mary had good-naturedly offered to come home with her, while the others went on for the berries. But on the way home something else must have happened, for Plain Mary now looked anything but good-natured and accommodating, and Kittie wore an air of suppressed excitement that surely had nothing to do with the ordinary adventures of a country walk.

Nancy waved them a welcome with her racquet. "Come and talk to me," she called. "Your Lewis would hate those tight shoes, Kittie, if he's the outdoor man you say he is."

"They're not tight," returned Kittie indignantly. "They're just new. Tramping shoes have to be new sometime, don't they, when you're

just beginning to tramp? And they have to be stiff and heavy, or they're not the correct thing." Kittie surveyed her modish walking boots with anguished approval.

"What's your trouble, Mary?" demanded Nancy, moving to make room for three on the bench. "You look as 'mad as a wet hen,' to quote my slangy brother Dick. Do your shoes hurt too?"

"No, they don't," said Mary curtly. "Are the rest back?"

"I haven't seen them," Nancy told her, "and the chances are they're not. When Lloyd gets into the woods she always wants to stay till the last minute."

"There!" cried Kittie triumphantly. "Didn't I tell you so, Mary Smith? I knew we had lots of time."

"Well, you weren't sure, and anyhow I don't call it a very square thing to do," insisted Plain Mary.

Nancy smiled amusedly from one flushed face to the other. "You've been quarreling, you two. Tell me all about it and I'll arbitrate."

"Nothing to arbitrate—now," said Plain Mary crossly. "But next time Kittie's shoes hurt and she wants to come home, before we're well started, anybody who feels like it can come with her or

the whole walk can be spoiled, for all I shall care."

Nancy patted Mary's shoulder comfortingly. "Did you want to get berries so much, you poor thing?"

Kittie giggled unfeelingly. "She hates long walks as much as I do, as you very well know, Nancy. She was tickled pink to have an excuse to turn back." Again Kittie giggled, and leaned forward to look at Mary's sullen red face. "You can't deny that it was fun, Mary Smith. You liked it just as much as I did till you began to worry about the others getting here first."

"Well, it was fun at first," conceded Plain Mary grudgingly, "but when you kept on and on, I happened to think that it wasn't being square to Miss Dutton, who thought we were coming straight back. And you perfectly well know that if the others had come first—and they may have yet, for all Nancy is sure—you wouldn't care about finding yourself in a horrid scrape any more than I should."

"Please, girls, stop quarreling long enough to tell me what under the sun you did on the way home," demanded Nancy plaintively.

"We followed a good-looking man," announced Plain Mary coldly. "At least Kittie followed him, and I, having volunteered to go home with

Kittie—because no Fair Oaks girl is supposed to walk on the country roads alone, and besides, Kittie is afraid to—I had to stick with her. So I followed him too."

"Why, Kittie Westervelt!" cried Nancy mirthfully. "Your Lewis ought to know about this. The idea of an engaged girl following a strange man around!"

"Mary's way of telling it isn't fair," objected Kittie, almost tearfully. "The man didn't see us—we didn't want him to. He was out walking with a girl, a Fair Oaks girl—the new day-pupil, you know, Nancy, who was put in our history division this morning. Just because I'm engaged, can't I be interested in other lovers?"

"That quiet, shy, homely little girl!" cried Nancy.

Kittie nodded. "That's what made it interesting. The man—Mr. Bob, she called him—was so tall and handsome and sort of splendid, and he treated that dowdy little thing so beautifully."

"Like the prince and the beggar maid," put in Plain Mary eagerly.

"There!" triumphed Kittie. "You were just as interested in them as I was, Mary Smith. You know you were."

"Stop quarreling and tell me the rest of it," commanded Nancy.

"We saw them first coming out of the woods beyond Mrs. Brendon's place," began Kittie meekly. "They had their arms full of bittersweet and barberry and things like that, which is a joke on Lloyd, of course, going miles and miles to get those very things. When they got to the road, they dropped all their branches to arrange them better for carrying. We were resting just around a curve in the road, because my feet hurt so, and of course we watched. They didn't see us, and they talked just as cozily. The man is going to the war, as a newspaper correspondent, we think. Anyhow he sails to-morrow," ended Kittie abruptly.

"He'd been helping her settle a house," Plain Mary took up the tale. "She said, 'I can't bear to have you go, Mr. Bob.' She's dowdy, Nancy, but she has a lovely voice—sort of a thrilling voice, that makes you listen to her. And he said, 'The house is pretty well off your hands, dear child. The last thing her serene highness demanded for it has now been secured.' He meant the berries, Nancy, because he waved at them. And the girl said, 'Oh, yes, it's been wonderful to have you help me settle. I can manage beautifully now, specially when your Mary Ann gets here, but I shall miss you dreadfully all the same, dear Mr. Bob.' And he said, 'You'd better miss

me, because her serene highness will forget me before my ship's sailed down the bay.' Go on, Kittie."

"Oh, no," said Kittie admiringly. "You go on, Mary. You remember it all wonderfully; I couldn't quote their very words like that. You make it sound like a play. Only you needn't pretend you weren't interested."

"Of course I was interested," admitted Mary. "It did seem to me like a play; they seemed like story-book people. But when they had tied up their berries and started off down the road, hand in hand, like children, and laughing like children about some joke we couldn't hear, why, then I wanted Kittie to come along home, taking the turn past Mrs. Brendon's when we came to it. And she wouldn't. She insisted on following those two."

"I wanted to see the house," protested Kittie, "the one they'd been fixing up. I thought it would be a lovely house, if that stunning man had spent his last days, before he goes off to France to write or to fight or something, fussing over it. I wanted to find out about 'her serene highness' too."

"But we didn't find out about her," put in Plain Mary. "And the house was that little weather-stained one with a knocker on the door,

where the two maiden ladies lived together, and last year the one that was ninety died of grief because the one that was eighty-six was dead. You know, Nancy."

Nancy nodded. "I know. It's never been painted except the blinds, and they're faded from green to blue."

"That's the house," said Kittie, "and it hasn't even been painted fresh for these people. When they got to it, a woman in a dark blue all-over apron came to the door—the front door, in the afternoon! She called out that they were late, *very* late, and Mr. Bob waved his berries at her and called back not to begrudge him one last holiday walk. But Annetta looked worried and ran as fast as she could up the path, and he ran after her."

"Annetta?" queried Nancy.

"Why, yes," explained Kittie impatiently. "That's the day-girl's name—Annetta Lester. How do you suppose Miss Marshall happened to take a girl from a tumble-down house like that?"

"Why, Annetta Lester is my ——" began impulsive Nancy. She had stopped too late; it was easy to see that both girls had understood her.

"Never mind, Nancy," Plain Mary consoled her. "Everybody knows that you can't keep secrets. We won't tell the others."

"No indeed," agreed Kittie. "But Nancy—being friends with a day-pupil is hard, isn't it? You could go to any girl's room here at school, but you wouldn't want to go to that tumble-down grey house to call."

"Kittie, you're a snob," Nancy told her severely. "Lots of nice people live in homely little houses, and horrid people in big grand ones. What's that quotation?—a man is known by the friends he keeps. Well, if this splendid 'Mr. Bob' is Annetta's friend—just because a man takes you walking, Kittie, and is nice to you, is no reason to think he's more than a friend—but if he's so splendid and is Annetta's friend, we can go by that, not by the house. But the first time I go to the house, I shall take you along, Kittie. It shall be your secret penance for leading Mary such a chase to-day."

"Good!" cried Plain Mary joyously. "Serves her right. But —— I say, Nancy, take me too. I'm no snob, and I want to know about Annetta's house and Mr. Bob and the serene highness person as much as Kittie does."

They all laughed at Mary's sudden abandonment of her pose as injured victim of Kittie's romantic curiosity, and Nancy promised to take both the girls with her if she ever went to see Annetta Lester.

"But first," she reflected, "I must get acquainted with her. I'd planned to do it to-night. Now I can't begin till to-morrow morning—not then, unless she hangs around up here between classes."

Miss Lester did not appear to be the sort of person who hangs around idly anywhere. She had been transferred to Nancy's history division, it transpired, because, with history at that hour, she had three classes in succession and was then free to go home. Nancy looked for her before the history recitation, but she wasn't to be found; which was not strange, considering that she came hurrying in ten minutes after the class began. Her tardiness necessitated her stopping to explain it to Miss Dutton when the class was over; and Nancy had to go to her own next recitation without waiting for the friendly between-classes greeting that she had planned. At the close of the third recitation, in which Nancy and her protégée were again together, the day-girl fairly flew to the door and sped through the hall like a neat, efficient whirlwind. No chance that day to make friends with Annetta Lester.

The next morning Annetta was ten minutes late again for her history, and when Miss Dutton called on her she "flunked dead," in school parlance, on a perfectly simple question. Miss Dutton

raised her eyebrows and looked hard at the day-girl, and the class looked too. Miss Lester didn't seem to notice that she was being stared at disapprovingly. She was a slight little girl, with straight, dark hair drawn straight back from her small pale face. She wore a plain dark blue dress, with only a crisp white collar to relieve its plainness. She looked rather shy, rather tired, a good deal bored with the proceedings of the history class, and not at all concerned with the discreditable part she had played in them.

"A funny sort of girl," was Nancy's judgment upon her, "but even if Kittie and Mary hadn't interested me in her, I believe I should be interested. For one thing she seems to be pretty careless—like me. And for all she flunked like that I can't believe she's stupid."

Annetta Lester lifted her eyes just then and caught Nancy's fixed upon her, and just the flicker of a smile curved her little mouth. Then her eyes dropped again, and she looked more bored—or was it only shy?—than ever.

"Miss Lee, Miss Lester, one moment, please."

The class was over and Miss Dutton, having forgotten to make her request sooner, shouted it above the noise of scraping chairs. Annetta Lester evidently didn't hear; she was going out with the rest. Nancy twitched her blue sleeve.

"Miss Dutton wants both of us," she explained smilingly.

"Oh, thank you," responded Miss Lester, smiling her vague little smile again. "Oh, dear, I know what she wants of me! Late again and unprepared."

"Miss Dutton is never really cross," Nancy consoled her. "I can't think what she wants of me——"

"This paper needs to be properly spelled and neatly copied, Nancy." Miss Dutton had left her desk and come to meet them. "I'm sorry, Miss Lester, but I believe I must ask you to return to the twelve o'clock division. You don't get to this early one in time."

"Oh, but——" began the new girl in consternation. "Will you please try me once more? Mary Ann has—that is, I am sure I can start in time hereafter. But Mary Ann couldn't—that is, the twelve o'clock class would be very inconvenient for me, Miss Dutton."

"Then I must insist on your appearing on time and properly prepared at this one," Miss Dutton told her. "Try for a week. Then, if things aren't going well, we can consult your mother." Miss Dutton, evidently in a hurry, turned abruptly away.

"Oh, but she can't do *that!*" said the new girl

looking after Miss Dutton's departing figure and speaking more to herself, apparently, than to Nancy. "Consulting Mother won't get us anywhere. I shall just have to manage——" She relapsed into silent meditation.

"I'm afraid you're careless too," said Nancy. "I am, so you needn't mind my knowing that you are. I've meant to try hard this year, but things happen, like this paper."

Annetta Lester glanced absently at the paper. "Oh, yes," she said, "untidy and badly spelled. No, that's not my trouble. Mr. Bob thinks I'm too neat, if anything. No, I'm not careless. I'm just fearfully busy."

"Busy?" repeated Nancy questioningly. "You mean with school work?"

The new girl shook her sleek head decisively. "Oh, no! With housekeeping and amusing my mother and hanging curtains and explaining things to Mary Ann and mending and breakfast trays and—oh, you know. Doing all the bothering things that don't count, but go with living."

Nancy looked perplexed. "But doesn't your mother keep house? While you're in school, doesn't she see to the other things?"

The new girl smiled her faint, tantalizing smile, that never got further than her mouth, never lighted her big eyes. "Oh, no," she said, "she's

not that kind of a mother. She's—wonderful. So the housekeeping and all the bothers are my job, you see,—part of it, at least. Lessons are just—well, there they are! I've never had much time for them, and now that we have a house——" The new girl saw a door closing down the hall, and ran for it.

Through the next hour Nancy's mind kept wandering from the lesson to the new girl, with her grown-up job, her wonderful mother, and her tantalizing habit of leaving most of her sentences unfinished. At the end of the third class she was delighted to find Annetta Lester waiting for her.

"I had to run away from you to avoid more trouble," she said, "but there's something I want to know. Is your name Nancy? I thought Miss Dutton called you that. Well, so is mine."

"But I thought it was Annetta," said Nancy in surprise.

"Oh, that's not a *name!* That's what my mother calls me," explained Miss Lester impatiently. "She thinks I'm not right for Nancy. She thinks a Nancy should be big and bouncing and red-cheeked and lively and comical. But, all the same, I was named Nancy, after my Grandmother Lester. It's down so in the family Bible, only I can't show it to you, because that Bible is in a trunk in the attic, and Mr. Bob has carelessly taken the key with him to France."

"Who is Mr. Bob?" inquired Nancy daringly. "You've spoken about him before."

"Oh, I'm always speaking of him," said Miss Lester. "He's our dearest friend. He's the one person in the world who never gets on my mother's nerves. He helps me a lot with everything. But he's gone to France now, and though he lent us Mary Ann, it's not the same thing at all. She gets on my mother's nerves fearfully. Well, now the point is, I really am Nancy Lester. Do you mind?"

"Do I mind?" laughed Nancy. "Why, how could I? You have as much right to the name as I have. Do you mind my being Nancy?"

"Oh, no," replied Miss Lester quickly, "I like it, of course, because I like you. It makes me all the more anxious to be Nancy in this school. Just as soon as I can get the time, I shall go to Miss Marshall and tell her about it: how Annetta is just a pet name that my mother wrote on my application without thinking that she shouldn't, and that I want to be Nancy, because that's my name. I'm horribly sick of Annetta!"

With a funny little grimace Annetta, born Nancy and resolved hereafter to be Nancy, hurried off to the little weather-stained house where she attended to "all the bothering things that go with living."

CHAPTER III

MORE ABOUT NANCY'S NAMESAKE

NANCY LEE took pleasure in informing the romantic Miss Westervelt that "Mr. Bob" was only a family friend of the Lesters'.

"Annetta Lester told me so herself, and she didn't act fussed at all, so I believe her," Nancy explained further. "She didn't ask me to come and see her. She's busy all the time—has to help a lot at home, because her mother hates housekeeping. They have one maid named Mary Ann, and you can choose between her and the mother for 'her serene highness.' There's nobody else in the family. Oh, the girl's name is really Nancy, she said, not Annetta. She wants to be called Nancy."

"Too bad you can't get a chance to make me do my penance," said Kittie, indifferent to a girl who "had to help a lot at home"; and there the matter dropped.

It was a full week before Nancy Lee had any more conversation with her protégée. The day-girl was not late once to her history, but she always slipped in at the very last minute, taking the seat nearest the door; and when the class was

over, Nancy Lee was promptly surrounded by her chattering friends, who diverted her always easily diverted mind from the new girl. When Nancy thought of her, it was to reflect comfortably that she was all right now. She wasn't late and she learned her lessons. In fact she learned them so well that twice she had drawn Miss Dutton's approving comment and the class's interest by her answers. Once it had been a question of Louis XIV and his "The state—I am the state."

"I've known people like that," said Miss Lester. "Not kings, of course; just men and women who think that the world is—their orange. And I've noticed that it certainly helps them to get more juice than their share." She went back to Louis.

Fair Oaks girls weren't in the habit of dropping personal observations apropos of the traits of French kings. Jane Learned went about proclaiming, "This school is my orange," and complained to Nancy Lee that it didn't work. She didn't speak to Nancy Lester about it for the same reason that Nancy Lee didn't talk to her more. Jane was popular too, though not so popular as Nancy Lee.

Another time it was James I of England who was in question. "If he was really 'the wisest fool in Christendom,'" began Nancy Lester in her sweet, clear voice, "he must have guessed that he

was a fool. Perhaps that's why he made such a muddle of his reign. I've noticed that brainy people who are impractical often seem perfectly possessed to run things. And the worse things go, the more dictatorial they get, unless they have a sense of humor. King James didn't have that, poor homely man!"

This intimate attitude toward dead kings was also a novelty in Fair Oaks history classes. Miss Dutton felt decidedly elated over the audible sigh of pity that concluded Nancy Lester's remarks about James I of England. It showed that one girl in her classes was taking her history to heart.

Jane Learned appreciated it too; she turned round in her seat and grinned jovially at little Miss Lester, and after the class she waited for her. "I say," she began, "you're always noticing things about people. What have you noticed about me? I tried that trick of yours about the world is my orange. I proclaimed that I was Fair Oaks School, but it was no go."

"You didn't believe it," said little Miss Lester solemnly. "You must believe it, or it won't work."

Jane laughed. "You've certainly known lots of queer, interesting people. What's your name—your first name, I mean? You don't want me to call you Miss Lester, do you?"

The little girl smiled her faint, flickering smile. "I should like you to call me Nancy," she said. "Nancy's my name."

Jane stared. "That's like N. Lee. Does she know it?"

Nancy Lester nodded.

"Well, you'll have to be Nancy Lester," Jane proclaimed easily. "Nancy Lee's got a patent on being Nancy in these parts. Oh, I know what you'll be—Nancy's namesake."

Nancy Lester smiled again. "That's a nice thing to be—a lovely thing. Nancy Lee is so sweet and dear."

"N. Lee is a little bit of all right," agreed Jane. "Only she ought to have told us all about her namesake. See here, why don't you come up here afternoons and sport around with the crowd and get acquainted?"

"I'm too busy most afternoons," explained Nancy Lester, "but to-morrow—perhaps I could come to-morrow."

"Good! We'll get the original Nancy and my sister Christina and play tennis. You play tennis?"

Nancy Lester shook her smooth head.

Jane considered. "Well, Miss MacPherson spoke about a hockey match to-morrow. You can play hockey in our class all right; nobody

here has tried it more than once or twice. Anyhow, you come, and we'll fix up something. It's a shame for you to miss the real fun of school when you have all the bother."

"It is a great bother when one is busy," agreed little Miss Lester placidly, going on down the hall to her next class.

Next morning Nancy Lester opened the door of Miss Dutton's recitation room exactly forty minutes after the class had been called to order, and therefore five minutes before it was to be dismissed. Her usually pale face was pink and her sleek hair was for once a little ruffled; she had evidently been running. She didn't act frightened or apologetic over her tardiness. She closed the door carefully, sat down in her usual seat, and in a minute volunteered the correct answer to a question about Stuart genealogy that had perplexed several of her fellow-students. When the class was over, she walked straight up to Miss Dutton's desk.

"This time shouldn't count, please," she announced in the voice that Mary Smith had noticed was thrilling, "because I have a perfectly good excuse. I found a starving child, and I had to feed her. Starving persons cannot be unduly hurried over their meal. I am sorry."

Before the amazed Miss Dutton could ask a

question, she had darted off, and was shouldering her way through the crowd of girls to the door.

"I have a book from the library. It should have been returned an hour ago," she explained, slipping away from Nancy Lee's detaining fingers.

"Don't rush so. Give the old book to somebody who hasn't a class right away," advised Nancy Lee. "Any girl will be glad to take it for you."

"Could I do that?" queried Nancy Lester. "Not when I'm bringing it back late, I think. I have a perfectly good excuse this time, and I'd better go and give it." And off she flew.

"I say, Nancy, your namesake that you never told me about is coming up this afternoon for hockey. Did she tell you?" It was Jane at Nancy's elbow. "Be sure to be on hand. Christina won't play, because Phyllis Knight prefers tennis."

"Christina's getting quite mad about Phyllis, isn't she?" said Nancy idly, and was sorry she had spoken when she saw the hurt look in Jane's eyes.

"Um," agreed Jane, trying hard to act unconcerned, "she is, rather. Guess I'll get quite mad about Nancy Namesake. She's a funny little thing. I heard part of her perfectly good excuse

for butting into history in time for the benediction, and it sounded exciting."

"Maybe she'll tell us more this afternoon," suggested Nancy.

Up in the school library just then Nancy Lester was repeating solemnly to an astonished librarian: "I have a perfectly good excuse for not returning the book sooner. I found a starving child. I had to feed her. Starving persons must not be unduly hurried over their meal. I am sorry." And off she went.

It rained in the afternoon: a sudden drenching downpour that caught Nancy Lester without an umbrella at the farther edge of the school campus, and was dripping off the brim of her plain little hat and the skirt of her plain little dress when she reached the shelter of the Senior House.

"Hello, Nancy's namesake!" Jane, who had seen her coming, shouted down at her. "The gentle Christina lives behind that first door to your right. Go and borrow a dry dress from her, because mine would drag on you most unfashionably."

"Oh, I couldn't do that," objected Nancy Lester. "She might not care ——"

"She's over at the gym. I'll lend you a dress." It was Nancy Lee on the floor above. "Goodness, but you're wet!"

"It doesn't 'specially matter," said Nancy Lester, starting up the stairs. "My clothes won't be hurt, and I never take cold."

"Too bad about hockey," said Nancy Lee, from the closet, where she was hunting a kimono. "The girls are going to dance in the gym, but that's no great fun, so Jane thought that, if you wanted to, we three might stay here and make fudge."

"Fudge—that's candy, isn't it?" said Nancy's namesake. "You mean cook it in a chafing-dish —and then eat it?"

"Why, yes," assented Nancy, puzzled at the other girl's manner. "That is, if you'd like to."

"Do you want me to say just what I'd like?" inquired Nancy Lester. She had slipped out of her wet dress and now sat, wrapped in Nancy's best pink satin negligee, which did not match at all with her plain little face and her straight, tightly braided hair.

"Of course," agreed Nancy.

"I've noticed," observed Nancy's namesake, "that very often people do what other people suggest when they hate to, and when the other people are really trying to please them and would prefer them to speak right out. So I thought that, as it's the one afternoon that I'm sure of for some time, I might as well tell you that I'd rather

dance than eat. Oh, I'd a thousand times rather! And as for chafing-dishes, I've had to cook so many things in them that I actually hate the sight of one. Now are you sure you don't mind my telling you?"

"Of course not," laughed Nancy. "It's always fun when people say things straight out like that. What can you cook?"

Nancy Lester shut her eyes and leaned back luxuriously in Nancy Lee's big chair, stroking the satin negligee lovingly as she talked. "Chicken à la king," she began, "creamed chicken, chicken cutlets, rarebits, dozens of cheese things, tomato things, egg things, mushrooms and crabmeat—delicious but very expensive—spaghetti à la anything you like, any one's favorite supper dish to order—that's all I happen to think of now." She opened her eyes and sat up straight. "If I go to this dance, will anybody dance with me? And—may I wear this? Because my own dress is going to be rather damp for dancing."

"Mercy, no!" Looking her consternation, Nancy darted for the closet. "I mean," she explained from its depths, "I will dance with you, and so will Jane, I know. We'll find you some other partners, and I'll find you a regular dress."

"A very plain one, please," begged Nancy Lester, "because I'm plain and useful."

"IT SOUNDS LIKE A GOOD STORY"

"How's this?" Nancy Lee held out a soft white silk, and Nancy Lester, with an anxious "You're sure you don't mind?" put it on without so much as a glance into Nancy's mirror.

"Now—could we go pretty soon?" she asked. "You see, I can't stay very long."

Nancy was just going to call Jane, when Jane appeared.

"I've heard of people who'd rather dance than eat," she said, throwing herself listlessly down on Nancy's couch. "I don't care which we do. Only first won't you tell us about your perfectly good excuse for being late this morning? I don't mean to be too curious, but I overheard snatches of what you said to Miss Dutton, and Cora Davis heard snatches of what you said to the librarian, and it sounds like a good story."

Little Miss Lester had jumped up eagerly when she heard Jane coming, ready to hurry to the gym. But she sat down now, after giving Jane one of her quick, "noticing" glances, as if she had the whole afternoon before her for conversation.

"I suppose you'll think it was a good story," she said. "People do, generally. I can generally make them sound like good stories, but at the time they happen they're usually just horribly inconvenient. This was."

"What do you mean by 'they,' Nancy Namesake?" demanded Jane.

"Oh, the things that keep happening to me," explained Nancy Lester. "Things you have to help about—like this. You'll see after I've told you. I was coming up here from the railway station, where I had been with my mother. I took that dingy little back street that runs along beside Main. I thought I should walk faster that way, and I hadn't any too much time. Then I saw a little girl ahead of me—a child eight or nine years old—run out into the gutter and pick up a dirty old piece of bread and tear at it just like a starved animal. I went to her and asked her please not to eat that bread, because it would surely make her ill, and I promised her nice clean things to eat, if she'd come with me. She dropped the bread as if it burned her; I think she thought it was stealing to take it, and that I had caught her. I took her all through the street, looking for a lunch-room, but there wasn't any, except a night-lunch cart away at the end. In there she ate and ate and ate, and I gave her food to take home. The lunch-cart man knew her, and said she belonged to a very poor family. He has five children himself, and one is blind and one is in state's prison."

"Oh, did you know him?" asked Jane in surprise.

Nancy Lester smiled her odd little smile. "I know him now," she said. "I never saw him till this morning. He told me about his family, and how he's saving money to paint his cart. He thinks new paint will attract custom."

"How funny for him to tell you all that!" exclaimed Nancy.

"Oh, but that wasn't all he told me," protested her namesake hastily. "The nicest part was about what happened to him when he was a hungry, ragged little boy in Ireland. I was in there about twenty minutes, you see. He had plenty of time to tell me things."

"And what did the child tell you?" asked Nancy.

"Only that her father beats her if she takes her mother's part when they quarrel, and her mother slaps her if she cries for more to eat. The child was too busy eating to talk much, you see. The lunch-cart man said she is a dreadful little liar, so perhaps —— Well, she was certainly starving hungry when I found her," concluded Nancy Lester.

"Did you tell the lunch-cart man who you were?" asked Jane.

Nancy Lester shook her head. "He didn't ask; they never ask. They just tell me all about themselves. It does seem queer, doesn't it? But it's the way people are—especially people in trouble. It's

happened to me so many times now that I don't think anything about it."

"Goodness!" Nancy Lee stared at her namesake amazedly. "You talk as if this sort of thing happened to you every day, like lessons and meals. You don't act a bit excited."

"Why, no, I'm not excited," said Nancy Lester. "Why should I be excited? I do seem to run across a good many people that are in trouble. But it's part of my job ——" She hesitated, and a pink flush spread over her pale little face. "I mean, of course I try to help if I can. Any one would."

"But I shouldn't know what to do," persisted Nancy Lee. "I shouldn't even know I ought to do anything. Why, if I'd seen a child eating a crust out of the street, I should have said, 'You dirty child! Leave that bread for the poor little sparrows and go ask your mother for another slice.' And either she'd have gone or she'd have stayed and made a face at me. But I should never have thought to buy her food. And I should have been afraid to go into that cart."

"That's because you're not the noticing kind, N. Lee, or the adventurous kind, either," Jane explained matters. "Oh, you can make a game of noticing things and play it to a finish—with the help of your friends, family, and neighbors.

But Nancy Namesake here plays alone—or works alone. That's a mistake, Nancy Namesake. What you should have done this morning was to hustle your starved kiddie up here, hand her over to the cook, with directions to fill her up instanter, and then sprint for your history class."

Nancy Lester shook her head dubiously. "Why should I bother a busy cook just because I took a back street and saw a back-street tragedy? It was—my job to feed the child, not hers. I mean, I hate to bother people."

"Jane, look at the clock!" Nancy Lee was smitten with sudden remorse. "We're making Nancy talk up here when she wanted to dance. Jane, your hair is a sight."

"Not to myself," said Jane coolly, "if I keep away from mirrors. If you two won't call me a quitter, I'm going to stay here and read. Reading just goes with rain and an empty house."

"I noticed that she didn't want to go to this dance," explained Nancy Lester, as they crossed to the gym by the inside passage. "I noticed that she was sad and worried about something. I suppose you know what. That's why I pretended not to be in a hurry to go."

Nancy Lee stared. "I hadn't noticed that at all—about Jane, I mean. I wonder what the trouble is."

"Well, there's one thing you must surely notice and tell me about," said Nancy Lester, changing the subject abruptly. "It's whether I dance well. Mr. Bob taught me, and he says I dance beautifully; but I can't go by that."

"Why can't you go by it?" demanded Nancy, who secretly shared Kittie's interest in the wonderful Mr. Bob.

"Why, because he dances so beautifully himself that any one can dance beautifully with him," returned Nancy's namesake, with an air of such perfect detachment that Nancy laughed.

"Oh, if that's it," she said, "I'll get Grace Allen to dance with you. If you can dance with Grace and not let her step on you, I'll mark you A+ in dancing. Most of the girls lead pretty well, but of course they don't get you round like a man, and the music is generally poor."

Nancy Lee danced with her namesake first, and decided that Mr. Bob's praise had not been unwarranted. Then she found Grace Allen, who did not get a chance to step on her partner once in the two circuits they made of the hall. Missing them from the floor, Nancy discovered them in the balcony. Grace was talking earnestly, and just as Nancy looked up, her namesake stretched out a hand and laid it protectingly over Grace's on the balcony railing. What was Grace saying,

Nancy wondered, to call out that pitying, protecting gesture from Nancy Lester? Grace was usually shy and reserved with strangers. The next time Nancy looked for her guest, she discovered her starting off with Jane Learned.

"Changed my mind and came." Jane grinned sheepishly. "Decided that I was a quitter, whether you two said so or not."

Christina came by just then, arm in arm with Phyllis Knight. Jane stopped them. "Nancy Namesake doesn't know many of us yet," she explained after introductions, "and she would rather dance than eat."

"I'd love to have the one after this with you," said little Christina, smiling at Nancy Lester.

Phyllis Knight shrugged her shoulders hard, so that Christina felt her doing it. "What's the matter, Phyllis?" she asked.

"Nothing," said Phyllis, "only you promised the next to me."

Christina looked up at Phyllis bewilderedly. "Oh, did I? Then could I have the one after with you?" she asked Nancy Lester.

Phyllis Knight, who led beautifully, stopped by the piano and said something to the girl who was playing—the school's best accompanist.

"Adele won't play after this," she announced casually, as she and Christina danced. "The Wal-

lace girl doesn't keep time. I'm going home, and I advise you to."

So Christina's one-step with Nancy Lester was not very successful, and after it the dance broke up.

"I've had a beautiful time," Nancy Lester told Jane and Nancy Lee, over in the Senior House. "My own dress is dry enough to run home in." She hooked its three hooks with quick, capable fingers, and jammed on her damp hat without a glance at Nancy's mirror. "My mother may be back for dinner," she went on, "so I must plan accordingly. That means one of my best salads, because she will be tired. Didn't I tell you she's in New York to-day? That's how I could come."

Jane stared after the hurrying little figure. "She's a queer duck, N. Lee. She isn't inquisitive; she isn't even curious. But she notices things. People tell her things. I wonder why?"

"What did you tell her, Jane?" demanded Nancy Lee.

"Nothing," snapped Jane. "Well, what if I did? I feel all the better for it." Jane departed for the third floor two steps at a time.

CHAPTER IV

JANE-ALL-ALONE

"JANE! Jane! Come down and hear my letter from Hope. And bring my book, please." Nancy Lee stood at the foot of the third-floor stairs and shouted inelegantly up at her friend Jane Learned.

"Jane! Oh, Jane!"

Still no answer.

"She's there," muttered Nancy Lee. "I'm sure she's there. Why doesn't she answer? Wants me to come up, I suppose." With a sigh Nancy Lee started on the ascent to Jane's quarters.

But a resounding knock on Jane's door evoked no answer. So she wasn't there after all. "Don't see how she got down without my knowing," grumbled Nancy Lee, and opened the door. Jane had borrowed Nancy's "Golden Treasury" that morning, and now Nancy needed it to prepare her own lesson.

"Oh, Jane, please excuse me!" Nancy backed out precipitately, without her "Golden Treasury." Jane was there. She was sitting at her desk, staring straight ahead of her. She had been crying;

her homely, freckled face was tear-stained, and her eyes were red and swollen. But she was not crying now. She was just staring, staring, thinking, thinking, grieving, grieving.

Something awful must have happened, Nancy decided, feeling her way down-stairs with an inconvenient film of moisture over her own eyes. But what could it be? Jane hadn't been in any serious scrapes this year; she was so interested in Red Cross work that all her surplus energies went into the knitting of untidy scarfs and the folding of wrinkled compresses. Miss MacPherson refolded these last before she sent them, warning Jane each time that to be slow and sure was the only road to success in the making of hospital supplies. But Jane tucked notes into the badly knit scarfs that Miss MacPherson chuckled over delightedly.

"The boys won't be minding a few dropped stitches," she told Miss Marshall, "when they see her heart's in the right place and she always throws them into a good laugh."

No, it couldn't be a scrape, unless it was something very recent, Nancy decided. Could it be Christina and Phyllis? No, because lately Jane had taken to joking about them, just as everybody else had been doing all along. Only Jane's jokes were funnier. So it couldn't be that.

"Come back, Nancy Lee. I'd like very much

to see the letter." It was Jane at the head of the stairs, white and shaky, but bound not to give way to her trouble, whatever it was.

"How does star-eyed Hope like college?" she asked when Nancy, much embarrassed, had followed her silently into her little tower room.

"Oh, Jane, I'm sorry I bothered you," said Nancy, when they were inside, with the door shut.

Jane muttered something about "a headache," and "off my feed," and "so grouchy I just wouldn't answer you," and Nancy read Hope's letter. Hope was enthusiastic about college, of course. It seemed as if a good many of the things you had to work over hardest there wouldn't help you to be really wise. "But I suppose I'm not wise enough yet to judge of that," conceded Hope. She hadn't much time for friends and fun, because she had insisted upon waiting on table for her board and letting Judge Smith give her as little as possible.

"One thing makes me feel very sad," she wrote. "Old Dolly is dead. Seems as if she had lived just long enough to get me to college and then hadn't the heart to go on working. She seemed just like one of the family. I used to tell her things on our way to school through the Cheney woods that I couldn't have told even to my mother. Having a horse die is pretty hard on a poor farmer.

Dolly was twenty-six, but she didn't seem so very old. The two big boys have stopped high school because they think it's too far to walk. I'd hoped to help them through college by and by."

Nancy looked up suddenly to find Jane crying over old Dolly.

"Oh, bother!" snapped Jane, sweeping her sleeve across her wet eyes. "I don't know what's the matter with me to-day." She got up with a jerk and walked to the window. "Yes, I do, too," she went on savagely, with her back to Nancy.

"I haven't seen Christina alone for a week. She hasn't been up here, and when I've been down there—always Phyllis. And to-day"—Jane choked suddenly—"Phyllis asked me to get out. Said they wanted to talk secrets. Oh, Christina didn't hear her tell me. I don't think she'd quite stand for that. But—I've lost her."

"I thought you didn't care any more," said Nancy. "I thought you'd decided to make a joke of it. It *is* a joke, you know,—or at least it's awfully silly, when two girls act like that. You said such lovely comical things, Jane."

"Oh, yes," agreed Jane fiercely, "I said lovely comical things. I decided to make a joke of it—to make 'em a laughing stock. Well, it's one thing to decide, and another to keep on and on

and on, when you're so miserable and hurt and lonely and ——" Jane's voice died away in a convulsive gulp of woe.

Nancy wished she could think of something really comforting to say, but nothing came to her. "You see, my little sister is so much younger," she began finally, "that we aren't chums exactly. And a brother is different too, I think. Dick is always having secrets from me, and going off on lovely tramps where girls aren't wanted, and generally hurting my feelings. Or at least he used to hurt my feelings, but now I expect it. Won't you get used to this, Jane? Can't you try to get used to it?"

"Yes," said Jane. "I can try. I can decide to get used to it. But when it comes to really doing it, why, it can't be done—with twins."

"But if Christina ——" Nancy began, and hesitated before the unnecessary heartlessness of the suggestion that Christina, a twin, seemed to have achieved Jane's impossible without effort. Then she had an inspiration. "Jane," she announced, "you've got to get used to it. What will you do when Christina's married? Getting married is a thing that's likely to happen to anybody with curls, and a smile like a cherub's. And after Christina's married, you'll always be second-best."

It was an effective thrust, if a somewhat cruel

one. Jane whirled away from the window with her old air of dauntless energy.

"That's so, Nancy Lee," she said quietly. "I hadn't thought of that. It's not a question of deciding not to care. I can't care. I simply mustn't. I've got to be somebody and do something all alone by myself. All right then, I will!"

Jane crossed to the desk where lay a fresh sheet of theme paper. "Jane-All-Alone Learned," she wrote across it, in her scraggly, unformed hand. "That's me from now on. Jane A. A. for short. Now what am I?"

Nancy looked puzzled. "You are just bound that you won't worry about Christina, Jane."

Jane poised her pencil above the paper thoughtfully. "Serene and unruffled," she said finally, writing it down. "Do you like that, Nancy, for a beginning of Jane-All-Alone? We could have her just cold and heartless, you know, but I thought, as we're starting on a perfectly fresh page, we might as well try to make her a fairly good sort."

"Jane, what are you talking about?" demanded Nancy. "You've decided to be Jane-All-Alone and not care about Christina. The thing to do, I should say, is to get interested in other things, specially things that Christina and Phyllis don't care for, like hockey and hare-and-hounds and——"

"And Jane-All-Alone," supplied Jane promptly. "Christina never does things like her, I assure you, N. Lee." And, as Nancy still looked puzzled and argumentative, Jane went on, "Can't you see, Nancy Lee, that when I've always been a half and now I've got to be a whole, I'm obliged to be an entirely different person? I can't just go on being Jane Learned, without Christina. Haven't I tried? Jane Learned is a silly thing, who cares most about having plenty of fun and making people laugh. Well, there's no real fun without Christina,"—Jane's voice quivered a little, —"and when you feel as unhappy as I do, you don't care wildly about making jokes. So Jane-All-Alone must start over on a different plan, and while we're about it we may as well decide what kind of a person we'd prefer her to be. She may not turn out just like that, but at least we can plan her. Now then, do you see, N. Lee? I wish Nancy Namesake were here. She'd see like a flash. Now then, we've got Jane A. A. serene and unruffled. That's not very far, really. What else shall she be?"

"Clever and amusing?" suggested Nancy, trying hard to play at Jane's queer game.

"Oh, not amusing," objected Jane. "I can't be amusing yet a while. I suppose I can try to be clever."

"Oh, Jane, you are clever!" declared Nancy.

"Well, I mean I can try to make my cleverness count for something," amended Jane. "I suppose I am as smart as the average, but I'm lazy. I work only when I'm either scared or interested." Jane's pencil again poised over the paper. "A steady, conscientious worker," she wrote at last. "There's something for Jane A. A. to live up to, poor girl."

"She'd better be athletic," suggested Nancy.

Jane considered. "You mean teams and crews and things, N. Lee? They don't interest me."

"They're fun when you get into them," persisted Nancy. "They'd be fine to keep your mind off other things. And they help the school."

"Ath-let-ic," Jane read slowly as she wrote it down. "That doesn't commit her to teams and things. It only makes her an all-around outdoor girl. I—she can be that. Now what?"

Nancy's face was round-eyed and solemn. "Why, Jane," she announced suddenly, "do you know what you're doing? You're planning yourself over as you want to be—as you think you ought to be. Why, I think it's the loveliest idea! I'd almost like to do it——"

"Then do it," snapped Jane. "I'm doing it because it's necessary. As I've told you, I can't be what I've been without Christina. I may as

well try to be somebody she'll admire. I'd like at least to have her notice Jane A. A.'s career. 'Serene, unruffled, a steady, conscientious worker, athletic'; there's nothing very spectacular on Jane A. A.'s chart so far. She sounds rather like a bore."

"A school leader, champion of the best school spirit," cried Nancy eagerly. "Make her that next, Jane. You can be that just as well as not—like Billie Bray, I mean, and Margaret Lewis."

"Don't know that I can," said Jane, modestly. "Wouldn't people think I was kidding them, if I tried it?"

"Not after they've seen you turned into a steady, conscientious worker," chuckled Nancy.

Jane chuckled too and wrote down Nancy's phrases. "Capable—of—wonderful—enterprise—in—a—crisis," she added at the bottom of her sheet. "There! There are possibilities of excitement in our last item, N. Lee, in case life for Jane A. A. becomes too dull and prosaic to be borne; and there are possibilities of amazing the gentle Christina. Now then!" Jane folded her precious document and tucked it into her pocket. "I shall take one item at a time, in their order. To-day I shall be serene and unruffled; to-morrow I shall also be steady and conscientious, and so on. Of course the time for our great displays of enterprise will depend on circumstances; on the crises.

Jane A. A. will just have to watch her chance for a grand-stand play and then make it." Jane lay back on her couch with an air of elegant leisure. "The serenest thing I can think of to do now—assuming as I do that you intend to leave me, in pursuit of your own scholarly and recreative activities—is to finish 'David Copperfield.' As my dulcet voice shall never say 'unprepared' after to-morrow, I may as well say it then, good and loud. As I'm to be athletic from day after to-morrow, I'd better lop around now, while yet I may." Jane smiled her twisted smile at Nancy. "I'm all right now, N. Lee, and I'm going to stay so. Thank you a lot. You may not be a noticing person like Nancy Namesake, but you're awfully comfortable to have around. You coöperate so beautifully."

Jane dressed for dinner in her best blue taffeta and a pair of battered tan shoes. Christina overtook her twin in the lower hall.

"You ought to save that dress, Jane," she told her. Christina had always exercised a motherly supervision over Jane's wardrobe. "And those shoes—oh, Jane!"

Jane smiled benignly at Christina. "Look higher up," she advised. "I began with my hair, and you should do the same. Don't you like it?"

"Why, yes, Jane, it's very becoming that way,"

agreed Christina. "You ought to do it so always. But your shoes ——"

"I didn't get to shoes to-night," said Jane placidly. "These were the ones I happened to be wearing, and after hair I had no time to change. To-morrow perhaps I shall begin at shoes. As for the dress, I need the moral support of it to-night. It makes me feel more the way I want to feel."

"You'll have it in ruins before Christmas, Jane."

"Perhaps," said Jane quickly. "But now that we live on different floors, Christina, and you seldom see me until it's too late for me to change, I think I'd better run my own wardrobe. Don't you?"

"Why, yes, if you like, Jane," said little Christina, dazed by the quiet dignity of Jane's manner toward her.

Over the soup Jane's table got into a heated discussion of votes for women. Kittie Westervelt's arguments always annoyed Jane, and to-night she was particularly obnoxious. At every pause in the discussion, her shrill voice could be heard repeating languidly but with determination: "Lewis says that women have enough to do as things are."

Jane had no strong convictions about suffrage, but at Kittie's third repetition of Lewis's opinion, she began to feel a strong conviction about Kittie that demanded instant expression.

"For goodness' sake, Kittie, don't say that again," she ordered in a manner so belligerent that everybody else stopped talking to listen to her.

"But it's an argument, Jane," Kittie defended herself plaintively. "And I thought people hadn't heard me before."

"'Lewis says that women have quite enough to do as things are,'" repeated Jane cuttingly. "That's what Kittie said, girls. It's no argument —not at this table, where 'Lewis' is an unknown quantity to all of us, and we therefore don't care a snap for his opinion. Besides that, it's ambiguous. 'As things are,' the women in several states and many foreign countries have the vote. 'As things are,' suffrage for women is gaining ground all over the world. Besides which, 'as things are,' some women have nothing to do that's worth doing. If you want to argue, Kittie, argue. Don't just muddle al——" Jane looked down the table just then, and caught Nancy Lee's gray eyes fixed on her in amusement. In a flash Jane turned upon the indignant, tearful Kittie.

"Now you go it, K. Westervelt," she ordered in her gayest, most comradely fashion. "Be as rude as I was, and as cross and hateful. Or if you scorn to resort to such methods, please ignore the episode. I'm as snappish as a bear to-night. Comes from too much David Copperfield, followed

by too much fuss about my hair. Say you'll excuse me, Kittie, and admire my neatly coiled tresses."

Poor Kittie, utterly bewildered, stammered an incoherent answer to Jane's apology. What was Jane up to now, she wondered? It must be a trap —this unwonted politeness. Kittie knew perfectly well that Jane despised her.

"You'll have to persuade Miss Marshall to let us have a man dance for our senior party," Jane was saying, still directing her remarks and her smile at Kittie. "Then you can ask your Lewis up for us all to see, and after that he'll be an argument at Fair Oaks—an effective one, I'm sure. It's queer, isn't it,"—Jane's smile swept serenely down the table,—"to think how much we girls know about each other and how little? We live together, eat, play, and work together for a year or two, and then off we go, back to our unknown families, friends, and suitors. A few visits, a few letters, and for most of us it's all over."

"Please don't be so doleful, Jane," begged Lloyd Mallory. "I'm too far away for many visits, much as I should like them, and I hate writing letters. Please don't rub it in."

"I'm only trying to explain how much a man-dance would do to bridge the gulf between the joyous present and the unknown future," said Jane.

"Kittie's Lewis might not be the only future husband present, you know."

The table settled happily to enthusiastic discussion of the joys of a senior dance, while Jane, with a sly wink at Nancy, finished her dinner in silence.

After dinner she joined Nancy on the way to the school parlor. "I've thought of something else," she said, "something fairly serene, slightly spectacular, and *very* steady and conscientious. Watch me pull it off. I think Jane A. A. is going to have a very successful first evening."

With her new air of dignified aloofness, Jane threaded her way to Miss Marshall. "Miss Marshall," she began, "I think we need a new society at Fair Oaks."

Miss Marshall looked interested. The Learned twins usually avoided her neighborhood. For Jane, head mischief maker, to be studying out the needs of the school and bringing them to her was certainly astonishing.

"What sort of society, Jane?" she asked, feeling her way a little.

"Anti-slang," explained Jane, with a twinkle. "No, Miss Marshall, I'm not joking. I didn't feel very talkative to-night, so for some few minutes at dinner I sat listening to the others. Even with the chief offender missing,"—Jane twinkled again,—"it was the limit—I mean it was pretty poor—

that's near-slang too, isn't it? Oh, near-slang is slangy! What I mean to say is, the table talk was unworthy of nice—of well-bred girls. There, Miss Marshall, if my struggle with the language hasn't convinced you that we need an Anti-Slang Society, nothing will."

Miss Marshall looked at Jane keenly, with a little of Kittie's suspicion in her mind. What was she up to now? But Jane looked back at Miss Marshall with a straightforward, honest gaze that had just a hint of pleading in it. "I mean it," said Jane. "A society of the girls will work better than all that the teachers can do or say. If the girls once get interested and begin to criticize each other, they'll soon criticize themselves. I'm the slangiest, so I thought I ought to be the founder of the thing—society."

"Very well, Jane. Let us tell them about it right away."

Little Christina's face was a study while Miss Marshall was explaining Jane's idea. Never in her life had Christina felt so puzzled. She was annoyed, too, at Jane for bewildering her so. Then Phyllis whispered that she thought the Anti-Slang Society was a silly idea; and Christina was even more annoyed, if possible, at Phyllis. When Jane was unanimously chosen president and had accepted with the same queer, new, solemn

manner with which she had rebuffed Christina earlier in the evening, Christina was more than ever in the dark. Jane serious, Jane consulting Miss Marshall, Jane wanting to speak correctly because slang and careless English were unrefined, Jane being first cross to her twin, and then ignoring her,—it hurt.

"It's just because I like Phyllis and Jane doesn't —and Phyllis doesn't," sighed little Christina. "We've always liked the same girls before, and the same girls have liked us. I can't help how Jane and Phyllis feel. I've been just the same to Jane, but I haven't seen her much. Why is Jane so different to me?"

Little Christina, who had always depended on Jane for the answers to difficult questions, had no idea of the correct answer to this one. While it was still running perplexingly in her head, Phyllis appeared.

"It's almost the end of study hours," she whispered. "If any one comes, I'll hide in your closet. I couldn't bear to think of your worrying your dear little head over those geometry originals. Here's the first figure, and this is how it goes ——"

"Oh, you must love me a lot, Phyllis, to help me so much," Christina told her gratefully. "Jane and Nancy never would. They'd just show me a little."

Phyllis shrugged. "This way is easier for both of us," she said, lying back in Christina's big chair and surveying Christina's fair bent head and anxious, loving little face with artistic satisfaction. Phyllis was quick and clever herself; she despised stupid girls, unless they were also pretty and blonde. Even then she despised them a little. But she enjoyed Christina's adoring admiration, and she was not yet tired of trying her wits against Jane Learned's in the matter of proving that the attraction of opposites was a silly myth.

As soon as the release-bell rang for the end of evening study hours, Nancy Lee threw her "Golden Treasury" in the air, caught it dexterously with one hand, and went dancing off in search of relaxation. Poetry was an unintelligible mystery to Nancy, and the study of it her hardest task. Without any definite destination in mind Nancy went down-stairs and there, remembering that Grace Allen's tender feelings needed periodical treatment, she went in to see her ex-roommate.

"Did you join Jane's Anti-Slang Society?" she asked.

"Yes, I did," returned Grace, "though I don't know as it will be of much use to me." There was a queer, hesitating constraint in Grace's manner.

Nancy couldn't resist a good-natured smile. "Oh, you're not the perfect English grammar, Grace," she told her. "And even if you were, you ought to join to help the rest of us."

"Yes," said Grace hesitatingly, "only I——" She changed the subject abruptly. "Jane was so cross last year when Vera Lawson said she was too slangy to associate with Jeanne Durand. Do you remember?"

Nancy nodded. "Vera always rubbed Jane the wrong way. She'd laugh if she heard about this. Oh, by the way, Grace, you liked Nancy Lester, didn't you? I saw you talking away as fast—up in the gallery."

Grace smiled. "Oh, yes, I liked her. I can't dance very long at a time, you know, Nancy. It's—not good for me. But she said she didn't mind. She's lovely, I think. She makes you feel as if you'd known her a long time."

Nancy suppressed a strong desire to ask Grace what she had said or done to make Nancy Lester look so sympathetic. Instead she remarked, "Be sure you plan to visit me at Easter vacation, Grace. Maybe, if I get to know her well enough, I'll ask Nancy Lester too."

"Oh, thank you, Nancy," said Grace. "I should like to, if I—— It's sweet of you to ask me, Nancy."

Nancy, going swiftly up-stairs to bed, reflected that she hadn't been very "sweet" about Grace's invitation. She had invited the twins, Mildred, and Lloyd to come after Christmas, and the invitation to Grace for Easter was meant to forestall hurt feelings on her part when she heard about the Christmas house party. At Christmas there was almost sure to be good weather for winter sports, and Nancy's favorite Aunt Alice had promised to chaperon a party of girls to a farm she owned near Nancy's home city. There were no such gay plans for Easter.

"But I can give her some sort of good time then," reflected Nancy. "Anyhow, I've got to have her once. Mother thought so too. But I can't and won't have her spoiling our Christmas fun."

CHAPTER V

DISPOSING OF CAPTAIN

"No," said Jane decidedly, "of course we can't make an exception of Timmy's anniversary party. We are creatures of habit, my children. Consider the beautiful anti-slang brain grooves created by two weeks of patient effort. Upset them by one afternoon's careless rapture? Not on your tintype!"

"Not on your ——"

"Oh, Jane! Telling us to be careful!"

"Madam president, you grieve us deeply."

Jane grinned benignly around the circle. "Wanted to see if you'd all show the proper reactions," she said. "It was a test of you. Having been a test, let us use it for an exercise in ingenious substitution. What shall we say instead? We mustn't lose force of diction, my dear friends, in striving for elegance. We await suggestions of elegant but stirring substitutes for this forcible but highly inelegant solecism 'not on your ——' I dare not repeat it."

The circle, consisting of most of the Senior

House, on its way from luncheon to afternoon study, grew meditative.

"I think 'Never!' spoken with expression, would be as good as anything," said Mildred Wallace.

"Jane would be likely to use some long-winded phrase like 'I cannot countenance such levity,'" said Lloyd, who, accustomed to Far-Western idioms and enunciation, noticed all the little peculiarities of her Eastern friends' speech. "But Miss Cripps would say, 'Put more simply,' to that."

"Why not the plain Saxon 'no'?" suggested Nancy Lee.

"Never is better," objected Phyllis Knight. "You can thunder it out louder and it sounds more final."

"'Not on your tin-type,'" repeated little Christina thoughtfully. "It sounds all right, but—what does it mean? What has it to do with our using slang at Timmy's party?"

Jane patted her twin's shoulder affectionately. "You've said it, twin. That's the fatal objection to a lot of slang—it's meaningless. That we must cut out entirely. But even the meaningless is picturesque at first thought, and some slang is really picturesque. We must strive for more elegant, more original picturesqueness. Using slang phrases is just copy-catting."

"We get you, Miss President. 'Copy-catting' is good." Phyllis Knight's lazy, low-pitched drawl was full of mockery. "Come on, Christina. We're being contaminated by all these tests and exercises."

Jane's hand dropped from Christina's shoulder. She had forgotten; Christina wasn't hers any longer. She was Jane-All-Alone.

"I like ——" began Christina, but stopped short when she felt Jane's hand slip away so fast. Phyllis was getting too "bossy." That was Christina's affair, though, not Jane's. If Jane was going to be angry about Phyllis's suggestion, why, she, Christina, would go with Phyllis.

"Will you dart down-town with me at four, Nancy?" asked Jane, turning her back on their arm-in-arm departure. "I must buy something for Timmy's anniversary box. I couldn't sew well enough to make anything."

"But I thought you made some rompers, Jane," said Nancy.

"Not finished," explained Jane. "Christina always did my buttonholes in return for Algebra. I tried one and it's a botch. So I've promised the rompers to Cook. They're quite good enough for her grandchild, but not worthy of Timmy."

"All right, I'll go with you," Nancy promised, and turned in at her own door.

Four o'clock found Lloyd, Jane, and Nancy, on the way to town. Lloyd couldn't sew either.

"What I do is neat enough," she explained, "but I finish one seam while the class is doing a garment. I'll tell you two a secret. I never saw a needle, except the crow-bars Pete uses on his clothes, until I came East. I suppose the Jap boy mended our clothes when he washed them, but I never saw him doing it."

"Must be a great country out there," sighed Jane. "I say, girls, what is that horse trying to do to the girl? Or is it the girl who's bossing the job?"

Fair Oaks campus was on a height of ground on the edge of town. Below it the road swept down in wide curves to the main village street; from one curve passers-by could look down as from a terrace to the road below and the cross streets. It was on one of these that a girl struggled with a broken bridle.

That was what had happened, Lloyd said, laughing at Jane's ignorance. "And she hasn't any baling-wire," went on Lloyd. "In my country we always carry bits of wire to mend the breaks."

"She acts afraid of her horse, too," put in Nancy.

Lloyd nodded. "Peaceful old cow of a beast, I should judge. If she'd drop his head, he'd stand

and she could take both hands for the knot." Lloyd searched the pockets of her mannish coat for string and a knife, and produced both. "Let's go and help her," she suggested. "It won't take a minute to fix her up, but without a knife or string she can't do anything."

They swung off down the hill and on to the side-road. The girl was still tugging at the broken strap, reaching on tiptoe because the old horse held his head high. Her small face was pale with fright, but it was set in lines of determination. She was desperate, but she hadn't given up.

"Want me to try?" called Lloyd.

The girl turned her head.

"Why, it's Nancy Namesake!" cried Jane.

"Nancy Lester, what are you doing?" demanded Nancy Lee.

"You're not much used to horses, are you?" said Lloyd, patting this horse's head and examining the break in the head-stall knowingly.

Nancy Lester gave a sigh of relief, relinquished the rein to Jane, and her place by the horse's head to Lloyd, and sat down, a huddle of trembling, frightened humanity, on the roadside curbing.

"Oh, I do thank you for coming!" she said. "I don't know anything about horses. I was never so near one before. The leather strap broke, and he stuck his head out and looked at me. I

couldn't get the thing on again, and I was so afraid he'd go away. Oh, it was terrible!"

Lloyd turned an incredulous face toward Nancy Lester. "You aren't really afraid of this old fellow?" she asked. "Why, you could lead him home by his mane. He's as gentle as a kitten." Lloyd stooped and grasped one of the horse's hind legs above the ankle. "Lift, old boy. Lift up!" She held the foot for a moment on her knee, then dropped it and stood up. "That's a good test of a horse's disposition," she said. "I'll lead him home by the mane, if you'd rather not wait while I tie this strap together."

"But I wasn't leading him home," protested Nancy Lester, who had stared, awestruck, at Lloyd's exhibition of daring. "I was leading him away from home—from my home, that is! I was leading him to—well, I thought the police station would be best."

"The police station!" repeated Jane incredulously. "What were you taking him there for? Isn't he your horse?"

"Oh, yes, he's mine," returned Nancy Lester wearily. "What would you do with him?"

"Fatten him up a little, to begin with," said Jane, with a suppressed giggle. "Excuse me for mentioning it, Nancy Namesake, but he's too thin for my taste."

"Why, yes, of course," agreed Nancy Lester impatiently. "That's why I wanted him. Of course, being thin, he's slow, and they were beating him shamefully with a stick."

Lloyd turned on the girl with angry, flashing eyes. "You let people beat your poor old horse?" she cried indignantly.

"Oh, he wasn't mine then," said Nancy Lester. "I was trying to make them stop, and Mother bought him, so they'd have to stop."

"Good for Mother!" cried Jane.

"Oh, yes," said Nancy Lester dispassionately, "it was very kind of her. Of course I'd said I wished he was mine, just as I said it about the house and the chintz hangings. You do say things like that sometimes. Oh, I don't blame Mother. She gave them their money and went back into the house. The whole trouble came from my being so scared of horses. Is the strap mended? Then I'll go on. I thank you all more than I can say. I shan't be half so frightened since I've seen the way Lloyd manages."

"We'll go too," offered Nancy Lee. "Something else might break before you get there —to wherever you decide to go, I mean. We'd just as soon go too. The police station must be near the stores, isn't it? Jane and Lloyd are going to buy presents for Timmy at the toy

store; so we can all go along together just as well as not."

"And I'll lead your horse," volunteered Lloyd.

"Oh, it's very kind of you," said Nancy Lester, "but you don't need to do it. You don't need to at all! Why should you bother about me?"

"We'll all walk in the road"—Jane settled the matter summarily—"and you can be telling us all about this horse deal as we go along. So far you've just excited our curiosity, you know."

"Oh, it's nothing special to tell," said Nancy Lester apathetically, as the procession started. "The horse was hitched to a fruit-cart. Two men were driving him up the hill toward our house. I happened to be looking out the window and saw them whipping him around his legs in a horrid way. So of course I went out and told them to stop. They were foreigners. Perhaps they didn't understand. Anyway, they wouldn't stop, and they seemed very angry."

"Weren't you afraid of them?" asked Nancy Lee.

"Oh, no," said Nancy Lester, "I wasn't afraid of them. I'm not afraid of much of anything except horses. I told the men that I should call the police and I went into the house to get my hat. There isn't any telephone, because the noise of one worries Mother. Just as I started in, she

came out, to stop all the commotion that was annoying her, you see. And I said, 'I wish it was my horse'—as you do say such things; and Mother said to the men, 'How much for your horse?' Foreigners always understand 'how much.' They said twenty dollars first, but after a little while they said five, with a bridle thrown in. So Mother pulled out the money, and said, 'There, Annetta, now he's yours!' and went back into the house because the disturbance had now stopped. So that's how I got this horse on my hands."

"Your mother must be a corker," said Jane, quite regardless of her official position in the Anti-Slang Society, of which no one present thought to remind her.

"Oh, yes," said Nancy Lester, "she is. But of course as there isn't any barn or shed or anything at our house and the lawn is lovely and smooth now, because Mother told the agent it must be, and I couldn't let him nibble off the hedge,—because she'd made a point of that too, nor trample the neighbors' lawns, of course—why, I have to dispose of my horse in some way. If he cost only five dollars, I presume he isn't good for anything. So I thought the police—a merciful death —— If you girls are really interested, if you really want to bother, please tell me what you'd do if

somebody bought you a horse that couldn't be good for much and you had no place to keep him."

"Why didn't you ask your mother what she intended you to do with him?" asked Jane curiously.

Nancy Lester's flickering smile swept across her face and vanished. "Because I know what she'd say. 'Do just what you like, Annetta.' That's what she always tells me. Mother hasn't any special ideas about disposing of inconvenient things she's happened to buy."

"Won't you tell us about a house and chintz hangings that you said you wanted and she got them for you?" demanded Nancy Lee.

"Oh, that?" said Nancy Lester. "Why, that's the house we live in now. The day we came up to look over Fair Oaks School, Miss Marshall took us out to her bungalow. It was so pretty and cozy, with all the bright cretonnes, that I said,—as you do say things like that,—'I wish I had a house to hang with English chintzes.' And the next thing I knew Mother saw the house we have now. 'I like that house, Annetta,' she said. 'We'll go and rent it.' And when she had rented it, she said, 'There, Annetta, now it's yours. You've got your house. Go get your chintzes.' It's quite a bother moving into an old house like that one. There's a good deal to it besides English

chintzes. I resolved not to say again that I wished I had a thing. But you do get excited."

"Nancy Lester, your mother must be *great*," said Jane eagerly.

"Oh, yes, of course she is," agreed Nancy Lester placidly. "Here are the stores. Where do you suppose is the police station?"

Lloyd halted her charge, patted his long nose, and pried his jaw open. "He isn't such a very old horse," she said, while the girls watched her inspection, spellbound.

"What of it, Lloyd?" asked Nancy Lee. "You're our authority on horses. What would you do with him?"

"I'd—why, I think I'd take him to some livery stable and get them to keep him for a day or so, and then look him over again," said Lloyd slowly. "He's very lame now, but that may be from having been hurt by those cruel men. It seems too bad to kill a nice old horse like this, unless you have to."

"Yes, it did to me," agreed Nancy Lester earnestly, "but I hadn't any place for him and I didn't think of a stable."

Nancy Lee remembered the little old weather-worn house and Nancy Lester's clothes, plain as clothes could be, and her having to help so much at home.

"We'll all chip in for his board," she suggested. "We're all interested."

"But he's my horse."

"Yes." Jane was quick to catch Nancy's cue. "He's cost your mother a great deal already. I'd love to help, and Lloyd is dippy about horses and always has her pockets full of money."

"I think perhaps I'd rather pay myself, thank you all very much just the same," said Nancy Lester. "We mustn't delay here or you will never get your errands done. Where is a stable?"

Jane pointed one out and went off to buy her toy and Lloyd's, supported by Nancy; while Lloyd and Nancy's namesake led the horse down the street to the stable.

"I have something for Timmy," said Nancy Lester, when the four were reunited, Jane carrying a huge Teddy Bear under one arm and a fuzzy dog under the other. "It's at home. I love all that I've heard about Timmy, and besides he's Nancy's namesake, too, like me. So I wanted to come to the party and to send him a birthday gift, like his other friends. It's five o'clock now and I shall be detained a few minutes at home, but I'll bring my present as fast as I can."

When Nancy Lester arrived at Timmy's anniversary party, which was being held in the gym, she found that her horse story had gone before her.

From all sides humorous comments and laughing questions assailed her. Solemnly she acknowledged and answered them.

"You shouldn't have told," she said, seeking out the group where her three rescuers sat. "It was nothing. I happened to look out the window, that's all."

"It's what your mother did that's so delicious," Jane reminded her.

"Oh, well, I don't mind your all admiring Mother," said Nancy Lester resignedly. "Everybody does that, of course. But there's nothing at all to admire about the things I do."

Nancy Lester's present for Timmy was a smocked suit of blue hand-woven linen. The things the other girls had made were plain and practical.

"Remember he lives in a lumber camp," had been Miss Marshall's warning, when the girls had begged her to let them celebrate Timmy's birthday by sending him a box of toys and clothes. So Nancy Lester's dress was passed from hand to hand, vastly admired and sternly criticized.

"Hand-made linen for a lumber camp!"

"Isn't it darling? Look at those tiny tucks!"

"Will you teach us to smock?"

"How did you ever know how to cut the cunning, stubby little trousers?"

"How did you ever find time to do it all?"

"It's quite easy to smock and I will show any of you. I cut the suit out by a pattern that I bought. I notice that you can always find time for things you really want to do," said Nancy Lester, in comprehensive rebuttal of her critics.

"All that work for a lumber camp!" persisted Jane Learned.

"His mother will like it to be very pretty," said Nancy Lester. "She will not mind where he wears it. I know! Mothers are that way about their babies. And other people—they often care most about little silly useless things that don't seem a bit like them. There's me, for instance. I have a dearest wish that I've had for years. And it looks like your sister Christina."

"Hear that, Christina!" somebody called. "Nancy Lester's dearest wish looks like you."

"Oh, does it!" laughed little Christina. "I didn't know wishes looked like people. Won't you tell it?"

Nancy Lester flushed pink and sternly refused to tell. "It's a silly wish for me," she said, "and it was sillier for me to speak of it. The point is that, because I and my wish don't match, I know that other people aren't what they seem either. So I give them funny presents sometimes, and generally they like them a little." Nancy Lester flushed pink again. "Oh, I never meant that

Timmy's mother will like mine best," she explained. "Only it's nice to have variety. And I thank you for letting me come to this party." Like a flash Nancy Lester was gone.

"I'll bet his mother does like it best," announced Jane inelegantly. "I say, N. Lee, I'm all for Nancy Namesake. She gets things done and then she departs like a whirlwind. Where is she off to now in such a rush?"

"She murmured, 'Six to dinner and Mary Ann was cross this afternoon' as she went," explained Nancy.

"Won't you take us to see her to-morrow?" demanded Plain Mary Smith, coming up with Kittie. "We think you know her well enough now to go to see her without being invited."

"Lloyd and Jane and I were going to stop for her to go and see about her horse," said Nancy. "You two can come along if you like."

But when Nancy suggested the girls' stopping at the little gray house, Nancy's namesake shook her head.

"Mother might be resting," she said. "She can't be disturbed at that hour. I'll be waiting for you at the corner down the hill. Please be prompt, because I shan't have long to be away. Mary Ann has struck on toasting the crumpets for tea, so I've got to do it."

Nancy Lester's horse was much improved by a night's rest and three square meals. He still limped badly, but the liveryman agreed with Lloyd that he might soon get over that. Lloyd pried open his mouth again expertly, and she and the liveryman announced unanimously, after a minute, that Nancy's horse wasn't a day over sixteen.

"Them Dagoes treats horses as if they was made of wood 'n' stone," said the liveryman. "They'll ruin a good one for you in an afternoon. I'll give you ten dollars for this 'ere horse now, miss, and throw in his board to date."

"Thank you," said Nancy Lester impassively, "but I couldn't sell a lame horse. I'll come again to-morrow, if I can spare the time. Be very good to him, please."

"Sure I will, miss," said the liveryman.

"He's got nice steady blue eyes," said Nancy Lester. "I notice that people with nice blue eyes are usually kind to animals."

"Noticing Nancy!" cried Jane triumphantly. "Now I've named you for keeps. You can't go on being just Nancy's namesake when you're a person by yourself."

"I like all your names for me, Jane," said little Nancy Lester gratefully. "I like your saying I'm a person by myself. And now I must fly to my crumpets." She flitted off up the hill.

"She's a worker," sighed Nancy Lee enviously. "Listen, girls. I've thought of a thing to do with that horse maybe. Only I don't know if we can arrange it. Nancy Lester can't be rich, living in that little old house and working so hard and all. But it costs more to keep a horse than it does to dispose of him. So if she'd let us divide up on the five dollars and the livery bill, and if the horse gets over being lame, and if it doesn't cost too dreadfully much to send him up to Vermont ——"

"The biggest collection of ifs I ever encountered, N. Lee," laughed Jane. "If we can climb over the pile, what then?"

"Why, we can give Nancy's horse to Hope's family. They'll be good to him and he can take the boys to school instead of old Dolly."

"Great thought!" cried Jane.

"Hope—she's the girl with the eyes, the girl who wants to be wise, and Timmy's Judge Smith is helping her through college," summarized Lloyd. "That's a fine idea, Nancy. Could I—couldn't you persuade Nancy Lester to let me send the horse up there? It is expensive, I'm afraid, but I should like to do it. My father sends me lots of money, and I don't care for clothes and candy and the things the other girls buy."

"Nancy Lee's idea, Noticing Nancy's horse,

Lloyd's money, my silver tongue persuading Nancy Namesake to let us all coöperate," said Jane. "Nancy Namesake is a very noticing person, but one thing has so far escaped her notice: coöperation. She apparently expects to play a lone hand, as they say out in Lloyd's country, and still win out. Well, that's taking very long odds. No, Nancy Lee, I certainly don't call that slang; it's merely delightfully idiomatic. Well now, to-morrow I'll try to set forth to Nancy Namesake the advantages of coöperation, as a method of lightening labor and increasing efficiency. Incidentally, I offer a valuable prize to the person who first penetrates to the interior of the small gray house, and a supplementary prize to the person who gives me a satisfactory description, obtained first hand, of Noticing Nancy's wonderful mother."

CHAPTER VI

THE UNINVITED GUEST

It did not take much of Jane's silver-tongued oratory to convince Nancy Lester that coöperation was essential to the proper disposition of her horse.

"Of course four heads are better than one, Jane," she agreed solemnly. "I am not so conceited that I can't see that. But the thing I don't understand is, why should you all bother? It's—my job. I mean, my mother bought this horse, and so I must arrange about him. Is Nancy Lee sure that her friend's father will want him? Is Lloyd sure he is gentle enough for those boys to drive? Because—there is always a merciful death. Or, if the liveryman will promise solemnly to exercise him properly and not to let careless or cruel persons drive him, he can just stay on there. So unless you all want to bother, why, you needn't. Nobody ever bothered before about all the things I happen to see."

"Then they've lost a lot of fun," declared Jane with decision. "Where on earth have you lived before? It must have been in some lonely spot

where friends and neighbors were as scarce as hens' teeth."

"Oh, we've lived in New York generally," explained Nancy Lester. "New York is a lonely sort of place; you certainly don't have any neighbors there, and so many sad things and happy things can happen right under your nose and you never see. Why, there was a wedding and a funeral in our apartment house one day, and I never should have known unless the elevator boy had told me. He was such a nice elevator boy!" sighed Nancy Lester. "He was always telling me interesting things. He was just about the best friend I had in New York—next to Mr. Bob, of course."

"Didn't you know the girls in your school?" asked Jane.

Nancy Lester shook her sleek head. "It was a fashionable school, you see, that I went to in New York, and the girls were fashionable girls. The principal is a friend of my mother's; that's how I happened to be sent there. Oh, it was a very good school," added Nancy Lester hastily. "But it wasn't a very friendly one, and then of course I didn't fit in. Nobody ever spoke to me all the four years I went there. That was why I was so astonished and delighted when Nancy Lee spoke to me, and then you, Jane."

"Thanks," said Jane huskily. "I say, you've

been Nancy-All-Alone with a vengeance, haven't you? Then you can understand —— Well, never mind that now. Some day maybe I'll tell you a little story about Jane A. A. Learned. The thing to do now is to inform the original Nancy that she can write star-eyed Hope about your horse. They'll want him, all right! I can see Hope's eyes shine when she reads the letter."

"Can you really see that?" asked Nancy Lester in a voice very full of thrills. "Then of course I want to do as you've planned. And I suppose, as Hope is your friend and Nancy's and Lloyd's, and you want to give her pleasure, I can't refuse to let you pay for sending the horse. But that's all you may pay," said Nancy Lester firmly. "My mother bought the horse and paid for him—that's settled. His board is to come out of the housekeeping money. I have put it down under the head of extras,—like dinner parties and cakes from New York for very special teas,—and there it shall stay."

"How delicious!" giggled Jane. "Exactly how did you put it down? 'Guest for two weeks, Mister Horse.' I say, Noticing Nancy, your horse needs a name."

"Oh, I've named him already," returned Nancy Lester promptly. "I call him 'Captain'—after a friend of mine."

"Good!" Jane nodded approval. "Sounds nice and dignified for a nice old horse. Those Haskins boys will shorten it to Cap probably. But I say, Nancy, grain is awfully high. Will the housekeeping money stretch—are you sure you want to—Lloyd is really awfully rich ——"

"Oh, there's always plenty of housekeeping money," said Nancy Lester indifferently. "Now this is the important thing: suppose he isn't gentle, and those boys get hurt?"

"Let Lloyd try him out in one of the liveryman's carriages," suggested Jane easily. "She'll know whether he's right for boys—supposing, that is, they aren't used to managing spirited horses."

"But it might bore Lloyd," objected Nancy Lester. "He isn't her horse. She's evidently used to fine horses. Why should she bother? Of course Hope is her friend ——"

"Oh, no," objected Jane hastily, "she doesn't know ——" Jane stopped dead. No use disturbing Nancy Lester's comfortable illusion that all her coadjutors knew Hope. "See here," Jane started over, "remember we've agreed that we believe in coöperation. At present you need a horse expert—that's Lloyd. No telling what Lloyd may need to-morrow. You be ready to pull with us later. Now we're pulling with you."

"I see." Nancy Lester smiled faintly up at

Jane. "It seems queer to me, because I've always pulled alone, as you call it, before. Nobody ever seemed to care. But I like it! Oh, I like it extremely! I'll certainly help you out when you need it—any of you. That's—my job. I mean I'm always glad to help," amended Nancy Lester hastily.

"But you never expect to be helped," objected Jane severely. "That's not playing square. This isn't New York, remember. You've got friends around here, and neighbors too, probably, who aren't too busy to be amused by the things you're forever noticing so busily. Coöperation is a circle, Noticing Nancy, not a line. You've got to take hands on both sides of you."

"Yes, Jane," said little Nancy Lester meekly, "I will. And I'm more relieved than I can say to get a good home for my horse. It's just one thing off my mind."

"Sure!" said Jane easily. "And so everybody is happy. That's coöperation."

Nancy Lee listened with interest, at various times through the fall term, to Jane's expositions of her new pet philosophy, coöperation.

"You see," Jane explained her preoccupation, "I've always had a sort of ready-made, didn't-have-to-think-about-it coöperation before—just being twins. The Twins were Terrible because they

always coöperated. Now that I'm Jane A. A.,—meaning just myself and not half of twins,—I'm in an ideal position to understand the deep inwardness of the whole subject. The world is divided into twins and not-twins," went on Jane magisterially. "Twins coöperate by nature; other people may or may not coöperate. I, from my heights of experience, am resolved to coöperate early and often, with picked persons, for picked reasons—and sometimes the persons won't cooperate back." Jane gave a sigh. "I must say I miss the other way. I don't get much done yet on the A. A. basis. But, as very few people in this world are lucky enough to be born twins, the A. A. basis, of coöperation picked and planned, is what makes the world go round. Some people can't get into the game—hermits and grouches. What use are they? Nancy Namesake, poor lonely little kid, in a school too fashionable to be decent to brains and sweetness, unless they had stylish clothes on—she just never understood coöperation. She's learning, though. She's the kind to catch on to a good thing,—when properly expounded by my silver-tongued oratory."

But if Nancy Lester was learning Jane's creed, she was a somewhat diffident pupil. She came and went in a perpetual hurry, seldom stopping to talk to any one; her small face always wore an

intent expression that often puckered itself into a strained frown.

"Oh, yes, I keep seeing things," she told Nancy Lee, in answer to a question, "especially when it's not very convenient to stop and attend to them. But I've managed them all right so far, since the affair of Captain. I can't be *always* bothering you and Jane and Lloyd, you know; that would be silly. Oh, yes, I'm fearfully busy all the time. A house is a great care. Mary Ann calls the stove cantankerous; but I should call her a great deal more cantankerous than the stove. Anyway, between her and her stove, toasting the crumpets for tea is usually a bad business. By the way, do you know of any new breakfast foods?"

Nancy Lee did not.

"My mother would like a different breakfast food every morning of her life," explained Nancy Lester, with her troubled little frown. "The grocer is seldom any help—he's not at all original—but once in a while people tell me of a new food, and then the grocer is very obliging about ordering it." She gave a long sigh. "How I do detest things to eat!" she said. "One has to spend so much time planning them and buying them and making them. And in a minute they're gone."

"Clothes are a bother too," said Nancy Lee thoughtfully.

"Not to me," objected her namesake. "I haven't any time for them, and besides, when you're just plain and useful like me, clothes certainly don't matter and aren't worth bothering with. The one thing I insist upon to the dressmaker is about the number of hooks. Five hooks is my limit."

"But don't you like to wear pretty things?" asked Nancy wonderingly.

"I never tried it," said Nancy Lester, "except the day I wore your dress. I liked that. But I'm sure I'd rather see my mother wear the pretty things. She does it so well. And it's out of the question for both of us to do it."

Nancy Lee thought she understood that perfectly; the Lesters hadn't money enough to buy pretty clothes for two. Tactfully she changed the subject to another that interested her and couldn't possibly hurt Nancy Lester's feelings.

"I'd love to see your mother," she said. Jane's prizes for seeing Mrs. Lester and the Lester house were still unclaimed, but Nancy Lee wasn't thinking of them; she was merely curious about this queer mother, so different from any other mother she knew about—more like a child, a petted, indulged, clever, charming only child.

"Oh, I'm sure you'd love to see her," Nancy Lester took up Nancy's hint politely, "and she'd enjoy seeing you. Only, you see, there are so

many people wanting her all the time,—grown people, I mean, her own friends—that I shouldn't like to bother her about seeing any one of my friends. Of course," said Nancy Lester frankly, "I never before had any friends who wanted to see her. I never had a friend all my own till I had you."

"It was a shame you went to such a horrid, snippy school," sympathized Nancy Lee.

"Oh, I just happened not to fit in," observed Nancy Lester uncomplainingly. "And I didn't care—really I didn't. You see, I didn't expect anything different. But I like it different! Oh, I like it immensely!"

That was the nice thing about Nancy Lester; she didn't want any one's pity. If she thought it was hard lines to have to keep house and assume other responsibilities dropped by a fascinating but irresponsible mother, if she hated being "plain and useful," if she wished for fewer inconvenient encounters with suffering humanity or abused animals, she never said so. She accepted her lot in life; she smiled her faint flickering smile when pleasures came her way; and she never, never asked for more than she got.

Nancy Lee thought all this out painstakingly. Jane's unwonted seriousness and her interest in Jane A. A.'s character had set her to "making

out" other girls, and she had infected Nancy with her analytical mood. Having thought it out, Nancy gave a deep sigh and wished devoutly that Grace Allen was like Nancy Lester. If Nancy Lester was Noticing Nancy, Grace Allen surely had as good a right to the title Unnoticing Grace. And while Nancy Lester expected nothing and was grateful for anything, Grace, so it seemed at times to her long-suffering ex-roommate, expected everything and then never realized that her friends had put themselves out to give it to her. Nancy Lee's particular grievance against Grace this fall was that, instead of accepting her invitation to Nancy's home for part of the Easter vacation, she had calmly asked if she might come at Christmas instead.

"I have a reason, Nancy," Grace had concluded her request.

"She always has a reason for things," Nancy burst out hotly, confiding her troubles to Jane Learned. "I hate reasons!"

"Didn't she tell you what it was?" asked Jane.

"No," snapped Nancy. "I guess I didn't ask her. I was too cross, thinking how my lovely Christmas party has been spoiled. First, you wouldn't come because I'd asked Christina, and then Christina wouldn't come either. And I

wanted you both most of all. I thought it would be like old times, with Phyllis out of the way."

"Couldn't be," said Jane quickly. "I'm sorry, Nancy, if you'd counted on your party to make it up for the twins. Please leave that out of the question."

"Well, I did hope you'd make up," confessed Nancy. "I really like Jane A. A. better than Jane-the-Twin, but I just can't bear to see Christina being so silly. Oh, I won't speak of it again, Jane, if you'd rather I wouldn't. As I was saying, you two won't come, and here's Grace, asking to come now instead of at Easter. I told her it was an outdoor party in the country—roughing it and old clothes and all. Grace isn't game for that sort of thing. She'll be a regular stick-in-the-mud. Dick and Johnny Andrews and Peter Little—they're all coming, Jane,—will be furious at having to lug her around."

"Why didn't you just say no to her?" inquired Jane.

"How could I?" wailed Nancy. "She'd overheard Christina telling me that she felt she ought to stay at home this vacation. Then she came right up and asked me about you; and I had to tell her you weren't coming. And then she asked if she couldn't come in your places, since there would be room. It took me by surprise, and

she acted so sort of funny and hesitating, as if she was keeping something back, that I just couldn't think of a thing to say but all right."

"Grace is sort of mystifying lately," reflected Jane. "She's given me the impression several times that she's keeping a grand secret all to herself. Well, N. Lee, just be thankful that she didn't talk you into the end of next week and bore you to tears with a full and explicit account of her reason. Going into complete details is the thing I can least stand in Grace. If she's cured that fault, maybe she'll cure her others. Cheer up, N. Lee, and hope for the best."

"Aunt Alice is always a perfect brick," Nancy remembered. "Maybe she'll manage to get Grace interested in knitting a sweater or something. Aunt Alice is knitting me a middy one, out of the loveliest silky old-gold wool. I'll give her a hint to try to keep Grace with her as much as possible."

"Hard on Aunt Alice, possibly," laughed Jane, "but chaperons always expect to be bored with the ineligibles. What are you going to do?"

Nancy sighed rapturously. "Everything! Skate, snow-shoe, ski, slide, picnic in the woods. Aunt Alice and Uncle Dick—he's her husband, but he'll be off on a business trip that week—love outdoor things, specially winter sports. The place is just planned for them. Jane Learned, don't you

dare to say it! Of course there'll be snow. There always is, Aunt Alice says, by the end of December."

"I wasn't going to mention snow," said Jane with a grin. "I was just going to remark that it always rains on the night of a lawn party. But don't you worry, Nancy. There'll be snow. If the twins were coming, and Grace wasn't, and everything was serene and lovely and the goose hung high, I couldn't guarantee the weather. But as things are, you'll be fairly snowed in and iced over. Take my word for it."

Jane was right. If nothing else was to be ideal about Nancy's house-party, the drifted fields, the firm ice on the little pond, the clear, sunshiny zero air, did their best to start it off auspiciously. Aunt Alice's country home was a low white farmhouse nestled under a wooded hill. Half-way up the slope was an old orchard and above that a pasture. And above the pasture, in a cup between two wooded ridges, was a pine-girdled pond. In Aunt Alice's barn were two steady old horses, who would patiently draw a wagon-load of coasters and their sleds up the hill all day, and Aunt Alice's "hired man," Tom Chadwick, never had any business which interfered with his "hitchin' up" and driving the team. Sometimes Aunt Alice went off with the rest; oftener she stayed in the house to

help Tom's wife, Melissa, cook for her hungry guests.

"If I knew which of you made these mince pies," said saucy Johnny Andrews, the first day at dinner, "I'd certainly kiss the cook."

Melissa, who was bringing in another hot pie at the moment, looked daggers at Johnny, but Aunt Alice liked all his noisy nonsense. She liked Mildred Wallace's enthusiasm. She sympathized with Lloyd's love of lonely places. She joined in staid Peter Little's regret that Hope Haskins hadn't been asked to Nancy's party—"There's always room for one more," she said—and she tried faithfully to interest Grace Allen in the rainbow-tinted wools she had tucked into her bag, because Nancy asked her to, at the last minute.

"To lend in case she should say she wished you'd show her about a sweater," Nancy had explained. "She will bore the boys to death, if she tags along on all our trips. I like Grace in a way, you know, Aunt Alice, but she won't fit in. She's not an outdoor girl at all."

So at first Aunt Alice obligingly did her best to keep the misfit guest indoors for part of the day.

"You girls mustn't let the boys wear you out," she cautioned them all. "Remember I'm down here to come back to, if you get tired or cold or wet. You can mess around in the kitchen—I

suppose the others wouldn't object to coming back to home-made candy. Or you can sit by the fire and dream. Don't you come in to amuse me, though, because I can always amuse myself. And, boys, don't you be late to meals."

During the laugh that followed that needless caution Aunt Alice turned to Grace. "Don't overdo, my dear," she said. "You don't look very strong."

"The doctor said to do just as I felt like," said Grace quietly. "I've had to be careful lately, but I needn't be any longer. And I feel like doing everything that everybody else does."

"I say, Grace, is that a dare?" asked Nancy's brother Dick.

Now Dick was a quiet, shy fellow, just the opposite of his chum, boisterous, talkative Johnny Andrews. Dick had strong likes and dislikes, and it was especially on his account that Nancy had regretted Grace's coming. She had been sure that Dick wouldn't like Grace, and she was none too sure how any of the boys would like Lloyd. Well, it was good of Dick to talk to Grace in that nice "jollying" way. It made her quite brighten up, to be singled out like that by the shy, silent boy of the crowd.

"No," she threw back at him gaily, "it isn't a dare; it's just a promise."

"Come along then," said Dick with comradely familiarity, "and help me map out a traverse track. We'll drive up over the hill, while the rest of these slow-pokes are getting ready. Tom says"—he turned to the other boys—"there's so much ice under the snow that we won't need to go to the trouble of icing a track. He says we can start in the upper pasture and come down humming. It will take some steering, of course, to go through the bars in the fence up there, and then between the barns down here," added Dick, "but I guess we can make it. Come on, Grace. Yes, come along, Johnny, if you're through putting on those fancy leggings of yours."

The first coast on the big sled was rather a slow one. The hill was long and steep, but breaking the track through the snow delayed progress. And after the track was broken,—curving down through the upper pasture, and swinging up a slope to avoid the orchard and get the advantage of the steepest part of the hill behind the house,—why, there was no trouble about keeping in the ruts and so getting through the pasture gate all right. But at the bottom of the hill, steering between the barns, where the snow was packed and icy, and the sled made no ruts at all—that was a different matter. It was easy the first time because they weren't going fast. The second time

Peter, who was steering, cried out, "Lean to the left!" and they got through by a narrow margin without hitting the barn on the right.

"I don't like that place," said Nancy Lee. "It's awfully narrow, and it's just one sheet of ice. Suppose we should slew?"

"Can't we go down some other way?" asked Mildred Wallace.

"Sure!" cried Johnny hilariously. "Next time we'll jump that six-foot hedge over there. Time after, we'll hit the small barn broadside on, and climb her. Sure, we won't stick to the road, if that's too tame for you."

"If you girls won't get panicky and bear your weight to the right when the steerer yells 'left,' we can make it easily," declared Dick. "Pile into the sleigh, everybody."

"I believe I'll try skiing on that little hill over there," said Mildred, when they reached the top. The skis had been brought up to the top of the coast for use later.

"Cold feet!" scoffed Johnny.

"I'm going to steer this trip," announced Dick. "Hop on, passengers." He looked around, and saw Nancy and Lloyd seated close together on the rear end of the long sled. "Why don't you move up?" he asked.

"Because if we've got to smash, we're not going

"AREN'T YOU A BIT AFRAID?"

to be smashed any harder than we have to be," declared Nancy Lee with decision. "Brave men who aren't afraid may ride in front."

They went down that way once, with the three boys ahead. Then Grace said timidly, "I'd like to get in front once. I love the wind in my face."

Dick jumped up to make a place for her directly behind the steerer. "Good for you!" he said.

After that Grace rode in front every time.

In the afternoon everybody, including Aunt Alice, went skiing. None of the girls had ever tried skis before, except Mildred, whose brief experience earlier in the day had been one grand series of tumbles. So first they tried a beginner's coast on a short gradual slope. Grace was the first to desert it and start from the top of the boys' long slide.

"Aren't you a bit afraid, Grace?" asked Mildred Wallace.

"Yes, I'm dreadfully afraid," replied Grace quietly, "but I like it. I like to think I can do it. If you just don't care about falling, Mildred, you don't fall so much. I think you try too hard."

"I say, Nancy, Grace Allen is a good sport," Dick confided to his somewhat irritated sister that evening. "Why didn't you ask her to visit you this summer?"

"Oh, Dick!" For once Nancy was just a little ill-natured. "She isn't game at all. She's the furthest from it of any girl I know. Don't you see, Dick, that —— I hate to tell you, if you don't see it, but any girl likes to be popular with boys. She saw it made a hit with you to act daring, and so she went on. To-morrow she'll probably be laid up with a lame ankle."

"Um," said Dick, whose mind, when made up, was not easy to change. "We'll see."

The next day Grace was not laid up with anything. It was Mildred whose numerous falls at skiing had left her so lame and sore that nothing could tempt her away from the fire. The rest took their skates and went up to the little mountain pond. Dick was a splendid skater. He skimmed over the ice, darting forward, backward, doing outer edge, figure eights, and grape vines, to the envious astonishment of the others.

"I wish I could do something like that," sighed Grace Allen, as Dick sailed up to his audience, after a particularly successful exhibition of outer edge.

"You can," said Dick. "It's not hard. I'll show you—all of you," he threw over his shoulder, skating off with Grace. And Grace, who was an indifferent skater, under Dick's enthusiastic tutelage was soon doing wonderful fancy figures.

"Think she isn't game, do you?" Dick scoffed that evening to Nancy. "I tell you, Nancy Lee, you don't know the meaning of the word. Think you were scared about those barns yesterday, you and Lloyd? Well, Grace was so scared that I could feel her trembling all over, when she sat behind me. Think you were stiff and tired skiing? Well, she was so tired, there at the last, that her knees caved right in under her. I said hadn't she better stop, and she said no, she wanted to learn. And this morning she stuck to that outer edge like a postage stamp, till she got it. Oh, you and Lloyd got it better in the end, but you're naturally handier at such things. What I mean by 'game,'" announced Dick loftily, "is doing a thing that scares you, sticking to a thing that beats you, making the best of a bad business."

"Then only a 'fraid-cat like Grace Allen can be really game," snapped Nancy.

"A 'fraid-cat like Grace Allen can be gamer than a thoughtless piece like you, who doesn't realize the risks she takes, or gamer than a rough rider like Lloyd, or than us boys," said Dick gravely.

Suddenly good-humored again, Nancy laughed. "Perhaps you're right, Dick," she said. "And I'm certainly glad you like Grace. I was afraid, you see, that you wouldn't. And I'm laughing,"

she explained, "to think how silly I am acting, trying to argue you into the very thing I'd worried about. I'm glad you like Grace, and glad she's having a good time."

Nancy sat up for five sleepy minutes after the rest had gone to bed writing to Jane, who would best appreciate the delightful humor of Nancy's house-party being turned into a sort of celebration of the gameness of Grace Allen, with Dick—"Difficult Dick," Jane had named him last summer because his taste in girls was so fastidious—in the rôle of chief celebrator.

CHAPTER VII

JANE A. A. SEES HER CHANCE

When Nancy Lee came back to Fair Oaks School after the Christmas holidays, she was fairly bubbling over with energy and enthusiasm.

"Now I'm going to pitch in and do things," she informed Jane, her special confidant. "You said I'd been spoiled by my lazy summer, and you were right. I didn't accomplish anything last fall. But now—just watch me hustle!"

"What at?" inquired Jane succinctly.

Nancy stared. "Why, at—everything. Lessons and fun and ——"

"Oh," said Jane indifferently, "I understand. I thought maybe you'd discovered a particular object in life, and I was hoping that Jane A. A. could share it. Jane A. A. is getting frightfully bored."

Nancy considered that for a moment. "I don't see how a person as bright as you, Jane, can be bored," she announced finally. "You've got so many different interests. If a person has any ideas in her head, with 'the world so full of a number of things' as it certainly is, I don't see how she can be bored."

"Correct," agreed Jane. "Only blockheads can be really and truly bored. What I meant was that I'm disheartened. I feel humdrum, and I want to feel interesting and important. I want—to quote from Jane A. A.'s valuable character map—to have a chance to prove that I'm 'capable of wonderful enterprise in a crisis.' Difficulty: there's no crisis."

"Isn't a crisis usually unpleasant?" queried Nancy. "Like a battle, or an accident when you have to rescue some one, or a panic when a theatre is on fire. That's my idea of crises, and I should certainly be glad to avoid them."

"Nancy Lee," accused Jane savagely, "you are getting to be a regular purist. A purist, my child, is a person who stickles about the exactly right word in the exactly right place. You've objected to 'bored'; I sustain you. But I refuse to let you bully me into thinking that a crisis need be unpleasant. When Christina got invited to the Yale prom, that was a crisis in her young life—or it will be when she's having a dress made. But she'll love all the fuss. When Lloyd is hunting a new wild-flower, that's a crisis for her. A crisis is merely a decisive point in one's career; it gives one a chance to make good. It's a thing you've got to rise to."

"I see," said Nancy meekly.

"All right," returned Jane. "Then, in that case, I'll make a confession. I don't care a snap about this crisis business, or Jane A. A.'s character map, either. What I want is to make a hit that Christina Learned will sit up and take notice of. And I can't do it."

"Oh, well, you will before long," Nancy assured her consolingly. "Miss Marshall must be feeling as energetic as I do, with all these contests she's planned for us this term. You can surely pick out one of Miss Marshall's contests to distinguish yourself in, Jane, when she's having so many."

Jane shrugged. "Miss Marshall thinks there isn't enough of the spirit of rivalry in girls' private schools. She told me so herself, before she took the general public into her confidence. All her old contests are to arouse our fighting blood. Since I founded the Anti-Slang Society, Miss Marshall considers me an understanding person and tells me things," chuckled Jane. "Well, I am an understanding person," she went on quickly. "I understand, for one thing, that it takes applied brains, as well as fighting blood, to make good in this world. Maybe Miss Marshall knows that, but doesn't consider it tactful to suggest that more brains wouldn't hurt this little old school. I understand also why Jane A. A. doesn't make the resounding hit I demand of her. You've got to

go in hard for one particular thing, in order to make a real hit. You've got to have a specialty. And the only specialty I ever had was good times —mostly silly ones. So I'm in a hard position. I'll consider this contest idea, Nancy, and see if my naturally marvelous but under-exercised talents cannot display themselves to advantage somewhere."

If Nancy Lee had come back to Fair Oaks feeling energetic, her feelings exactly matched the school atmosphere that January. In fact, perhaps the school atmosphere was partly responsible for Nancy's alertness, quite as much as were the outdoor vacation days at Aunt Alice's farm.

"I've been doing some hard thinking this vacation," Miss Marshall had told her girls on the first evening of the new term. "I've been in New York and Boston. I've been to Peace meetings, Preparedness meetings, Red Cross meetings. I've heard fine music, looked at good pictures, been to the theatres. I've bought an armful of the worthwhile new books. In other words, girls, I've tried to put my finger on the pulse of the big world we live in, and oh, I've found it beating fast and hard! Now our little world up here must be in touch with the big world outside, if we are really fitting ourselves to be good citizens of that big world. In many ways we are in touch. We've our war

babies, our Red Cross work, our really vital discussions of the day's news, our fine outdoor spirit. But in our general interests, in the way we take hold of our regular tasks, I think, there is a lack of the firm, hard grip, the fierce determination to succeed, the fighting spirit, that is at the root of the mood of to-day. You all know the type of languishing little Victorian lady, with her narrow outlook, her foolish fancy work, her lavender salts, and her fainting fits. Well, we're not like that, but I think we're a little too languishing for to-day—too much like the girls of, say, nineteen-twelve, when less was expected and needed of men and women than is needed to-day.

"Yes, I've felt the pulse of the world; I've measured us by it; and last of all I've tried to find a way of cultivating this grip and earnestness and fighting spirit in behalf of the good cause, that I find outside. I think Fair Oaks, like most girls' schools, has too little chance for wholesome rivalries. Rivalry, prizes, contests of any sort are supposed to make young girls nervous. But I don't think our nerves need much coddling."

"Not since Miss MacPherson brought on all her games," suggested somebody.

Miss Marshall smiled her agreement. "So I've arranged some fun for you," she went on, "that, like all fun, has hard work behind it. For a be-

ginning, I've written to ten schools not far from us, and we've already planned two features: a Winter Sport Carnival for the end of this month to be held here, and short story contest, to be closed in April."

Suppressed "ohs" and "ahs" of delight had greeted the first half of Miss Marshall's announcement; the second was received in silence.

"Miss Marshall," Plain Mary Smith ventured at last, "did you decide that short stories are a part of the spirit of to-day? Because I heard my guardian, Dr. Jameson, say during the holidays that all his favorite writers must be in the trenches or writing up their experiences there. He can't find any good stories to read nowadays, he said."

Miss Marshall gave Plain Mary a swift glance of wondering admiration. She had had a general idea in the back of her mind that Mary Smith was unmitigatedly stupid.

"I'm sure Dr. Jameson is right, Mary," she said heartily. "Short stories, fiction of any sort, seem trivial to-day, compared to the big, thrilling facts of real life. And it's quite true that the men and women who write—the men and women with imagination—are fighting or nursing or trying in some way to help the stricken people who need help so bitterly. Writers, artists of any sort, feel the present situation more keenly than the rest of

us, because they are artists and have the artist's imagination—'the seeing eye' is the best name for it, I think. Well, I want you girls to cultivate that seeing eye. That's why I've suggested the short story contest. Health from outdoor sports, the seeing eye, and the wish to win out for one's own credit and the school's—that's what I've planned for you so far. Is your question answered, Mary?"

"I—think so," said Mary doubtfully. Then, blushing very red, she plunged again. "Miss Marshall, do you really think a person can learn to write? I always thought it was something you were born with."

There was a general laugh, and poor Mary, brick-red with mortification, looked as if she was wishing for an earthquake to swallow her.

Miss Marshall held up a hand to quell the tumult. "Girls," she told them sternly, "I'm disappointed in you. Mary is bringing us ideas—big ideas about the big problems of life, and you miss the point entirely, just because Mary has expressed herself a little crudely. What you meant, Mary, is that you believe genius to be a gift from heaven—that you would distrust Carlyle's definition of it as 'an infinite capacity for taking pains'? Is that it? Well, suppose we have a debate on that subject—let me see, a week from to-night. Mary,

you defend your side, with five helpers. Jane, suppose you take the opposite view, with five assistants. Arrange the exact terms of the question and the rules of debate to suit yourselves. The rest of us will count on an entertaining hour or so. Now, Mary, leaving the merits of this question until later, I will merely say that I don't hope to develop you all into geniuses. But I do hope that the members of the senior short story class that Miss Dutton is to teach this half-year will observe life and think about life and analyze some 'slices of life,' as the phrase goes; and even if their stories aren't any of them works of genius, I hope they will have helped their creators to understand, to notice, to look out of the window and see, where before they've only stared blindly."

"Why, that's just like Nancy Lester!" cried Nancy Lee, so astonished at the fitness of Miss Marshall's description that she spoke her thoughts out loud.

This time Miss Marshall joined in the general laugh at the expense of Nancy's impulsive outspokenness.

"Then perhaps Nancy Lester will win the short story contest for Fair Oaks," she said smilingly. "Of course I want Fair Oaks to take the honors."

Nobody thought to tell Nancy Lester, who was

absent for the first days of the term with a bad cold, of Miss Marshall's prophecy about her. Indeed, so much more interesting and so much more imminent did the Winter Sport Carnival seem that the other matter speedily faded into the background of distant futurity. Also, there were midyear examinations this term, for the first time in the history of Fair Oaks.

"More of that 'fighting spirit' program, I suppose," sighed Phyllis Knight. "Clever of Miss Marshall not to mention this bright particular feature when she was getting us interested in the project."

"'Suppress bad news,'" said Jane, in gallant defense of the Head. "That's a pulse-beat of the times all right, I fancy, over in Europe. But I, for one, don't regard these exams as unmitigated bad luck. I can always write better than I can talk. Ergo, I'm a shade less likely to get into trouble over exams than I should have been in the recitations they displace."

Jane, searching for a specialty, anxiously awaited news of more of Miss Marshall's contests. Examinations wouldn't do—they didn't offer the spectacular opportunity she needed. Athletics wouldn't do; Jane boasted no athletic prowess of any sort. As for short stories, Jane didn't consider them seriously. No details for the prize

contest had been announced; the affair seemed very vague and very distant. Jane handed in a slipshod, carelessly written sketch as her first class contribution, and, that off her mind, crammed history dates so violently that her paper fairly bristled with them and really worried poor little Miss Dutton, who refused to think that Jane Learned would "crib," but failed to conceive of a mind that could hold what Jane had stuffed into hers—for a day or two.

And then the hectic examination week was over; recitations were resumed once more, the story class among them. And at the very first session Miss Dutton read two stories.

"One is so bad that I really must make an object lesson of it," she said, "and one is so good that, though it is a little more elaborate than the sketch I asked for, I want you all to hear it. It gives me great encouragement," she concluded, "that Fair Oaks may win the short story prize."

The "object lesson" was Jane's poorly prepared work. Jane schooled herself not to give away her authorship of the disgraceful thing. She would not blush for herself, much as she wanted to. She laughed at her inanities with the rest; she even joined casually in the discussion about radical defects and possible improvements. Miss Dutton liked her pluck; she caught Jane's eye

once and smiled her appreciation of the way Jane could receive a reprimand.

Then came the encouraging story; "The Actor Woman," it was called. It was the simple yet curiously impressive tale of a child, a yellow-haired, green-clad girl, gay and piquant as a dandelion blossom. The child had long ears, like most children; she had heard talk of an Interloper who was coming to her house—the big lovely house where she lived alone with Father Dear, because Mother Darling had been dead ever since the child Cicely could remember. Cicely's Aunt, who was father's sister, had come one day, and they had quarreled about something. Cicely thought it was the Stage, but Matilda the Nurse said it was the Interloper. Then Cicely's Uncle had come, and Father Dear had talked to him for ages in the library about the Stage and the Interloper, and Uncle Dick went off without giving Cicely any candy. Now Father Dear was away. One day he came back with a lady, a sweet little, curly-haired lady, with wide, sad eyes and a wistful mouth. Cicely stared at her curiously. When she looked for Father Dear, he had vanished; the little lady had signaled to him to go. Cicely gravely took the newcomer's hand and conducted her to a secluded nook in the garden. "Oh, tell me," she demanded, "are you the Interloper?

Because—I didn't understand. I was going to help them keep you out. But I like your looks. Oh, I like them very much! I'll find a place for you. I'll give you my coral beads and my bestest doll. So don't you care! I'll make Father Dear let you stay and some day he'll surely love you, because he loves my puppy and my gray kitten, though at first they bothered him. But I—I love you this minute."

Then the wistful little lady put her arms tight about Cicely and said brokenly, her face hidden in Cicely's yellow fluff of hair, "Darling, darling, darling." "Why, that's like my mother," sighed Cicely happily. "She used to say sweet things over and over."

"I thought you said you loathe children, Marian," said Father Dear, coming back just then.

"Men are *so* stupid!" smiled the little lady. "I only wanted to give your family a perfectly fair chance against me."

Cicely wondered why Father Dear, who had looked happy but worried, now, upon being called stupid by the Interloper, suddenly looked perfectly happy.

That was all there was to the little story; no special plot, only the three people, no fine talk or elaborate descriptions.

"But you see it!" cried Mildred Wallace.

"You see the whole thing just as if it was your own little sis——" Mildred paused suddenly, having discovered that Lloyd Mallory and Mary Smith were crying.

"Who wrote it, please, Miss Dutton?" demanded Phyllis Knight, with a scornful curl of her lip for girls who cried over stories—in public.

Miss Dutton glanced doubtfully about the room, hesitated a moment, and shook her head.

"I'm afraid the author must announce herself," she said. "I should be proud to tell you who she is, but I think it's her right to do that, or not to, as she pleases." She looked at the clock. "The class is dismissed."

"Who do you think wrote it?"

"That girl will win us the story contest with one hand behind her. No use any one else from here competing against her."

"Why, it was just like the stories in a magazine —better than lots of them."

"Well, who wrote it?"

"That's the point," said little Mildred Wallace. "Not Phyllis, nor Mary, nor Lloyd, nor I, of course, because we've all practically said we didn't."

"Jane Learned acted sort of uninterested while Miss Dutton was reading it," suggested Nancy Lee, "and she's awfully clever."

There was a general descent upon Jane.

"Was it your story that was read, Jane?" Nancy asked her.

Jane grinned. "Which one?"

"You know which one, Jane," said Kittie Westervelt impressively. Kittie vastly admired Jane, little as she understood her.

"Um ——" Jane considered modestly. "Well, perhaps I do know, Kittie. But I wanted to be perfectly sure how public opinion rates me."

"Did you write 'The Actor Woman,' Jane?" demanded all the girls in chorus.

Jane shrugged, still grinning diabolically.

"She did! She did! She did!" cried Nancy Lee, as pleased as if she herself was the heroine of the hour.

"I never said so," Jane warned them coldly.

Lloyd Mallory stepped out of the group, so that she could see every one in it. "Who disputes Jane's authorship of 'The Actor Woman'?" she demanded.

"Hear! Hear!" cried Jane, a queer look of relief stealing over her face. "That's good western directness for you. Let the woman who wrote 'The Actor Woman' put her hat—her theme paper—in the ring."

Nobody spoke.

"Is the whole class here?" asked Mildred.

"All but that little Lester girl. It wasn't she

of course," said Phyllis Knight, scornful as usual. "She made off, when class was over, with her accustomed speed. She appears to find our society extremely distasteful."

"Oh, are you sure——" began Nancy Lee, and stopped dead. The idea that she of all people should dispute Jane's claim to the wonderful story! Of course if Jane hadn't written it, she would have said so by this time. And as she hadn't said so, why here was Jane A. A.'s chance to stagger Christina. "Jane Learned," said Nancy solemnly, "of course you know what you're in for."

"It was sweet, Jane," whispered Lloyd. "It was like lovely flowers. Not because you said Cicely was like a dandelion, but because it was all so alive and beautiful."

"Oh, I say, Lloyd!" Jane, about to disclaim the story, foisted upon her by the perfectly unaccountable silence of she could not even guess whom, caught her twin's gaze fixed upon her in awed, happy admiration. Jane's mouth shut tight in spite of her. It was such fun to see Christina look like that once more. In a minute, in an hour, the girl who had written the story would come forward. Until then, Jane resolved to bask in Christina's worshipful wonder.

"I believe I could write a good story if I put

my mind to it," she thought regretfully, "a story almost as good as that one, maybe. But I didn't try. Of course Miss Dutton thinks I'm no good at writing. There's another contest I'm out of!" Jane sighed deeply. Jane A. A. did so long for a chance to show her capacity for "wonderful enterprise in a crisis." And now all the chance she had was to show that she could bluff. That was the old Jane's favorite method. Jane A. A. scorned such trickery, but when it was all she could compass, she couldn't resist its temporary effect.

"See here!" It was Phyllis's deep drawling voice in Jane's ear. "Have you any idea why the little Lester is always in a hurry? That stuffy old house and an eccentric mother wouldn't keep me on the jump to get back to them, even if I didn't care much for Fair Oaks."

Jane turned to look at Phyllis curiously. "Why this sudden interest in the little Lester, as you call her?" she inquired in her turn. "We call her Noticing Nancy, because she sees so many exciting things, as she hops from home to school and back. I suppose she finds more of her excitements outside the campus than on it and that's why she runs away so fast. But why do you care?"

"Christina is as much interested as I am," announced Phyllis insolently. "In fact, it was

Christina who suggested that I ask you. 'Jane will know,' she said. Her faith in you is sublime."

"Well, I've told you all I know," snapped Jane, so bitterly hurt by Phyllis's jeering reference to the way Christina used to be that she couldn't even try to be civil.

"Oh, have you—really?" inquired Phyllis, smiling her hateful smile, but otherwise utterly ignoring Jane's curtness. "Then, for this once, I'm afraid your twin's trust is misplaced. For this once, I have an idea that Christina and I are the ones who know,—not clever Jane."

"I haven't an idea what you're talking about," said Jane, who was far too miserable even to try to follow Phyllis's insinuations.

"I'm not talking about anything much," said Phyllis lightly. "I'm just telling you that when people act mysterious and worried and live in queer houses and stick there like prairie dogs to their holes—when Christina and I see queer things like that, we consider the signs of the times, that your revered Miss Marshall is forever talking about, and we pick one to fit."

"To fit what?" demanded Jane, still stupid.

"The little Lester, naturally," said Phyllis brightly. "She's the phenomenon we're trying at present to explain. Query: why doth the little

Lester flit so fast about the world? Answer—in terms of the times."

"Well, what is the answer?" demanded Jane impatiently. "Your answer, I mean. I've told you the right one; she's so busy helping at home and doing nice things for all the poor unfortunates she meets that she has to hurry."

Phyllis shrugged. "Very pretty, but not in tune with the times, Jane. These are war times. Hasn't any one told you that the little gray house fairly swarms with distinguished-looking foreign gentlemen, and a few ladies ditto? Hasn't any one told you that the lights never go out there till morning, and that night or day none of the neighbors can get in? Has no one commented to you on the fact that the little Lester, though she has a suitor 'somewhere in France,' never speaks to Jeanne and Miss MacPherson about their soldiers, and never does a stitch for the Red Cross? Christina and I think the wonderful Mr. Bob is fighting on the unpopular side in France. Our answer to the little Lester and her wonderful mother, in terms of the times, is—spies." With a flashing, jeering smile at Jane, Phyllis sauntered off.

For a minute Jane glared after her in silence. Then her sense of humor asserted itself and she laughed. "How—perfectly absurd!" she called

after Phyllis. "It reminds me of lots of Christina's ideas—wild, though interesting."

"Yes. She got most of them from you, according to both the twins," Phyllis flashed back at her. "But this one is different. It sounds wild, does it? Read the newspapers, Jane, and observe that the times are wild. Then watch the little Lester. And don't let her silly tales fool you." With a maddening air of superiority, Phyllis departed, leaving Jane fairly stupefied with helpless rage.

CHAPTER VIII

GRACE ALLEN'S REASON

GRACE ALLEN didn't come back to school after the Christmas recess. She sent Nancy Lee a grateful note, thanking her for all the pleasure she had had at Aunt Alice's house-party.

"Those were wonderful days," Grace wrote. "Somehow I just fitted into the party. If you knew how much I enjoyed it all, you would be glad, dear Nancy, truly you would! My going there and taking part in all the thrilling outdoor sports has nothing to do with my not being able to come back to school. I knew I wasn't coming all the time, and I almost told you; but it would have been too hard to say good-bye. I did tell that funny little Nancy Lester—Nancy Namesake, Jane Learned calls her. I don't know how I happened to. I like her, but not, of course, as I do you and Lloyd. The party you helped me give for Lloyd last year is another beautiful memory you have given to me, Nancy."

"Goodness, how sentimental she is, with all her

beautiful memories!" muttered Nancy when she had read so far in the note. And the end was maddeningly mysterious.

"I may not write you again"—here "for a long while" was scratched out and "at present" substituted. "But I shall love you forever and always. Please write to me *before Thursday.* GRACE."

It was a busy week. Thursday came and went, and Friday, and Saturday, before Nancy Lee found time to comply with Grace's demand—a quite unreasonable one, she thought it. On Saturday, Phyllis Knight, who, as a newcomer, had had the least desirable room in the Senior House, and who naturally preferred the first floor where Christina had her quarters, moved down into Grace's room.

"But where are Grace's things?" asked Nancy, astonished.

"She took them away before Christmas, I think," Phyllis explained. "Miss Marshall has known all along that her room was permanently vacant, but she didn't want to give it to me, so she's delayed until she couldn't decently get out of it. She abhors crushes," concluded Phyllis, meaningly.

Nancy paid scant attention to Phyllis's inuendoes. She felt too guilty about Grace, who must be really ill or in some sort of dreadful trouble to

be leaving school for good. She hurried up to her room and scribbled a hasty note. Letter-writing was not Nancy's forte. She had plenty to tell Grace, about the athletic meet, Nancy Lester's cold, Jane's wonderful story, and Kittie Westervelt's engagement ring, which Kittie wore hung from her neck in deference to her mother's opinions, but displayed eagerly to privileged persons. Perhaps Nancy had too much to say ; at any rate, the news items sounded bald and disconnected, and the few words she added at the end about being sorry that Grace had left school didn't ring true, though Nancy meant them all, and more. For years after she wrote that note, Nancy Lee never sealed a friendly letter without thinking, " Have I put my love on the paper ? " nor without experiencing a twinge of regret for the careless, belated scrawl she had sent to Grace Allen.

Jane Learned, who had hated to have Phyllis next to her, hated still more to have her moved down next to Christina. She kept thinking jealously of the intimate goings to and fro down there. Phyllis hadn't a dress that she could get into alone. Jane had detested hooking her up, but she detested still worse the thought of eager little Christina's deft fingers working away for Phyllis. Phyllis declared she could not study alone. She had often crept into Jane's room during study-

hours, when such visits were strictly forbidden; and she had jeered gaily at the gloomy reception she got.

"I thought you twins were keen for scrapes," she said once. "Or is it only Christina who wants all the fun there is going? Guess I'll dare the stairs and go see somebody cheerful, who's glad I've come to enliven her solitude."

Now Phyllis had no stairs to "dare" between herself and Christina. Jane set her lips, resolving not to think about the old days of the twins' close companionship. She would be Jane A. A., "serene and unruffled," "a steady conscientious worker," "a school leader," but in spite of her steadiness brilliant, "capable of tremendous enterprise in a crisis."

"Well, I am capable of it," Jane assured herself angrily. "But it isn't a crisis that I've got on my hands now; it's a mess. And if I tell any one—even Nancy Lee—and ask for advice, why, my chance to make good is gone forever. Query: is it a chance or a disaster? Shall I keep quiet and stay in the game, or shall I explain and run for cover—while Phyllis Knight subtly insinuates to Christina that I'm a bluffer, that my hand has been called, and my game is up. My word, I pity that little Nancy-All-Alone Lester! Being Jane A. A. in solemn earnest just for once, with no

good pal to confide in, is too much like work for yours truly."

Now this was the disaster that had happened to Jane: the Short Story class had gathered informally in Miss Dutton's study after luncheon one day, without notice to Jane Learned, who was not wanted, for once, by her friends. They had thereupon unanimously resolved to petition the said Jane Learned to be the official Fair Oaks contestant in the Ten-School Short Story Prize Contest. Any other Fair Oaks girl was free to compete, and the more who tried the better; but "We want Jane!" cried the Short Story class, adjourned, after a brief but exciting session, to the third floor of the Senior House. They had gone there to present their resolution, formally written down by Lloyd Mallory, whose hand was like copper plate, on a sheet of Kittie Westervelt's gold-lettered Fair Oaks stationery. Having duly presented the resolution, they next proceeded to endorse it orally, as noisily and as long as the rules about quiet for afternoon study hours would permit. Their action took Jane completely by surprise; and the fact that little Christina presented the resolution, accompanied by a timid hug, upset her so completely that she gasped feebly like a fish out of water, stammered "Thank you!" and then devoted herself to a blushing perusal of the resolution, taking so

"DON'T TRY TO EXPLAIN IT"

much time to it that the enthusiasm of the "resolvers" was finally dampened. They remembered their afternoon duties and went off to attend to them.

"Seems as if Jane wasn't so jolly as she used to be," commented Plain Mary Smith thoughtfully.

"Maybe she's just not so slangy," suggested Mildred Wallace.

"To-day for once Jane she is not so quick on the up-give," cried Jeanne Durand gaily. "Is that slang? Jane taught it me last year."

"Quick on the uptake, you mean, Jeanne," corrected Nancy Lee. "Yes, it is slang—or at least it's very near being slang, I'm sure."

"Jane's funny lately," announced little Christina worriedly. "She's queer to me, and she was queer about this. I don't see why."

"Nobody will hold you responsible for Jane's queerness, dearie, so don't try to explain it," Phyllis Knight cut in, drawing Christina into her room and ostentatiously closing the door.

Nancy Lee shook a vindictive fist at the innocent door. "Jane's worrying ——" She paused, remembering how Jane hated any reference to the twins' troubles. "Jane's an old dear," she revised her remark hastily.

"And we were young fools to let Christina hand

her our petition," added sensitive Lloyd Mallory in Nancy's ear.

Meanwhile Jane A. A. Learned, having secured solitude in which to think over her absurd plight, came to the general conclusion already recorded: to wit, that she was in a mess, and that she would have to get herself out alone and unaided. Why, oh, why hadn't she spoken right out the day that disgraceful sketch of hers was read? It had all seemed like a good joke then. But why hadn't she spoken to-day? Surely Jane A. A. wasn't fool enough to let Christina's half-hearted hug lead her on to complete and inescapable riot and disaster. Messes such as this were like Jane the twin; they were far beneath Jane A. A.'s dignified aloofness from any kind of scrape. But when Jane thought it over again in cold blood, she decided she was glad that she hadn't spoken out plainly to the petitioners.

"Maybe it is a scrape," she reasoned. "Well, I'm in it. I've been in it ever since the day I let them think I wrote the story. Why didn't the other girl speak up then? I don't know who she is, and I don't know what reason she had for standing back and leaving me in the pit I'd digged for myself. But now—she can't speak now, or she'd think she couldn't, because it would make me out a liar. This began as a joke, but it's gone

far past that. Maybe the other girl will compete for the story prize and win it for Fair Oaks. Maybe she'll still stand back, saying to herself, 'It's up to Jane!' Well, it is! It's up to Jane A. A. If the other girl wins, all right. If not, I've got to. Fair Oaks shan't be beaten by a lie! I thought, that fatal day, that I could write a good story, if I honestly tried. Well, I've got to try, and I've also got to succeed. If ever a person had a crisis on her hands and was positively obliged to rise to it, that's me, Jane A. A. Learned. I've simply got to win! And won't Christina be properly impressed if I do. But there can't be any 'if,' Jane A. A. Remember that, please!"

Having thus quickly made up her mind to undertake the responsibility thrust upon her,—quickly, because she wanted to decide that way,—and then having slowly and painstakingly justified herself—slowly this time, because it was a pretty hard matter to square the deliberate acting of a lie with one's conscience,—having done all this, Jane rested on her oars. The contest did not close for six weeks. Six weeks, in Jane's eyes, was an eternity. She would have dozens of splendid plots in her head long, long before it was necessary to choose the best one and work it into a prize-winning tale. Jane dedicated an impressive, leather-covered, gilt-edged note-book to the collec-

tion of plot material. She wrote "Plot I" dashingly at the top of the first page, and then, having no Plot I in mind at the moment, she closed the book and the incident. After the new term's classes were better organized, after the exciting athletic meet, which would come off in less than three weeks, Jane A. A. could and would devote herself to making good her unfortunate bluff that if she hadn't written "The Actor Woman" she could do as well or better when she gave her whole mind to it. As a bluff rather than as a lie, Jane decided to regard her action.

But before the classes had well started, before the outdoor meet had come off, something else happened, something to sadden all Fair Oaks School, but especially the little Senior coterie to which Jane and Nancy Lee belonged. First came a letter to Miss Marshall from Grace Allen's mother.

"Please break it gently to her friends," Mrs. Allen wrote. "Grace is dying fast. We have known, she and I, since August that nothing could be done for her, but Grace has not wanted any one else to be shocked or saddened by the knowledge. At first the doctors hoped to prolong her life by rest and guarding against over-exertion, but lately they have told her to do as she pleased, and she has been very happy in the feeling that once more she was like other girls. Nancy Lee

gave her a rapturous time at Christmas. She talks to me constantly of Nancy and Lloyd Mallory, her two favorite friends, and of many other girls.

"She knows I am writing you. 'They will have to hear it some time,' she said, 'and perhaps it will be easier for them to expect it a little.'"

The letter came in the evening mail and Miss Marshall was on her way to Lloyd and Nancy with it, when a telegram arrived: "Grace died this afternoon."

"So now I know her reason," Nancy tearfully told Jane. "Oh, how mean and hateful I feel! All the fun she had was just because Dick happened to like her best. I was horrid about that too. I didn't answer her letter when she asked me to, and when I did I wrote a snippy, stupid note, in a rush because I wanted to be through and have some fun. I almost hope she never saw that note. And now—there's nothing I can ever—oh, Jane!" Nancy's lips quivered and her gray eyes filled with hot tears of remorse. It seemed so easy now to have written Grace promptly, to have sent her a jolly letter that would at least have eased the tedium of those last dark days.

"Don't—feel—so—bad," gulped Jane. "You were—fine to her, Nancy. Last year you put up with everything—and that house-party —— You

grumbled, but she didn't know that. She told Mildred that it was like a lovely dream come true."

"I know," sighed Nancy, "but I tell you that was all Dick's doings, not mine—and a little Aunt Alice's. When Mildred told me what Grace said, I laughed and made a horrid remark about girls who are man-crazy. And Mildred, and Lloyd too, got that idea from me, and we—sort of—banded together against her. You know the way girls are. At night when we all put on kimonos and brushed our hair in some one's room and talked, we didn't—let her into all the fun. And we never asked her how she felt. We asked each other about our lame spots and black-and-blue spots but we wouldn't ask her. If she tried to join in, we choked her off, just to spite her for being so thick with Dick. Dick said she was game, but even he didn't guess how game she was. Oh, if we'd only known!"

"That's where I have to shoulder my share of the blame, I'm afraid," said Jane soberly. "I told her that it wasn't fashionable to talk about one's health—nor interesting. I was forever rubbing it in, if she approached the subject. Naturally, she wouldn't tell us anything about her being fatally ill, with me making remarks like that all the time. I wish we'd known! Did any

one know? Lloyd didn't. She feels dreadfully too."

"Grace said in her letter to me that Nancy Lester knew she wasn't coming back after Christmas," Nancy remembered. "But I don't suppose Nancy Lester knew why. Grace didn't see much of her—nobody does."

But next morning Nancy Lester, upon being told the sad news by Nancy Lee and Jane, announced that she had known of Grace's fatal illness all along. "She told me at the dance in the gym, away back last fall," Nancy Lester explained. "Oh, of course I didn't ask her! How should I have known there was anything to ask about? We were dancing and she got out of breath easily, so we stopped. And she just told me. I pitied her so! She asked me not to tell, because she couldn't bear to seem odd and different. She wanted to be just a regular Fair Oaks girl till she died, she said."

Jane stared solemnly at little Miss Lester. "I know why people tell you things, Noticing Nancy," she declared. "You understand. That's why. The rest of us just listen for a minute and then go back to our own affairs. But you—you get into the skin of the other person and you know what he means better than he does himself sometimes. You understand."

Nancy Lester smiled her flickering smile at Jane. "Oh, I'm not so wonderful as that sounds, Jane. Of course I try to understand. It's too bad that we can't all of us understand, always, before it's—too late. Nancy dear, please, oh, please, don't cry. I've thought of something lovely for us to coöperate about. It's been worrying me all night—ever since yesterday afternoon when I happened to take a walk and see—and sort of promise to try to help. I mustn't be late to my next lesson, but I'll tell you after I'm through classes—no, there's all that crowd for luncheon to-day, and Mary Ann naturally cross about it. But this afternoon I'll come up and tell you. It's something lovely, and we can do it for Grace. So please cheer up, dear Nancy Lee!"

It was twenty minutes after the beginning of afternoon recreation before Nancy Lester, very hot and tired, appeared at the Senior House, to find Nancy, Jane, Lloyd, Jeanne, Mary Smith, and Kittie, all sitting dolefully in Nancy's room, waiting for her. Nancy had discovered that several girls besides herself and Jane wished they had done more for Grace; and she had asked them all to come and hear Nancy's plan.

"Yes, it's big enough for you all," Nancy Lester answered Nancy Lee's apology for the presence of the extra girls. "It's plenty big enough, so no-

body needs to be left out. Of course you may not like it, but oh, it would relieve my mind so if you should! It's like Captain ——" she turned to Lloyd, smiling faintly. "It's something that's not in my line. Anyhow I can't possibly do it all. But oh, we could do it beautifully together, if Miss Marshall doesn't mind."

"Is it something that's against the rules?" asked Kitty Westervelt hopefully.

Nancy Lester shrugged. "It's against the—arrangements," she substituted. "It would mean being absent from some of the sacred recitations, and missing some of the sacred study hours, and maybe some of the sacred periods of outdoor exercise." She made a funny little grimace. "Boarding school is life according to schedule, to system. I never could see that life went that way. It doesn't for me, I'm sure. I keep noticing things that must be done, no matter whether I get to my history class on time or not. And then they scold. Somebody else will have to explain this plan to Miss Marshall, because I'm too deep in her black books, for being late so often to my classes, to dare ask a favor."

"Well, what is your plan?" demanded Jane impatiently. "Fire away, and if we like the idea, Nancy Lee, the great original Nancy, can break it gently to Miss Marshall. Or I can," added Jane

proudly. Jane-the-Twin had not ceased to be in pleasant awe of Jane A. A.'s familiarity with the head of the school.

"Well ——" Noticing Nancy paused uncertainly. "Oh, I suppose it's a queer thing to propose to you," she went on swiftly, after a moment. "Not to be queer seems to be another of their pet ideas in schools for girls. In my New York school they were forever urging us to be sane and well-balanced. That meant you mustn't cry over hurt kittens or Mary Queen of Scots, and you mustn't imagine, if you met a blind beggar, what it was like to be blind,—not really imagine it clearly, I mean, because young girls should be gay and happy."

"Well, shouldn't they?" demanded Kittie Westervelt argumentatively.

"Please get to the big idea," insisted Jane.

Nancy Lester looked from one girl to the other, and answered both at once.

"The young girl I happened to see yesterday was crying," said Nancy Lester. "She hasn't much to be gay about, I can tell you. Her little sister is dreadfully ill, and she can't afford to go and see her. She can't pay her fare, that is, if she has also to pay a substitute to teach her school while she is gone. I could possibly manage the history. Who of you knows geography? Is there

any one who is good in arithmetic? Because she says her children are fine in arithmetic. They 'stump' her, she says. We ought to try not to let them 'stump' us."

"Noticing Nancy Lester," began Jane severely, "I may not be good in arithmetic, but you're worse in explanation. You'd never pass in explanation, Noticing Nancy. Now listen! Begin at the beginning, like this: 'As I was out walking yesterday afternoon I passed—I saw ——' Go on like that—and hurry up about it."

"As I was out walking yesterday," repeated Nancy Lester meekly, "I passed the little red schoolhouse on the corner by Mrs. Brendon's."

"Why, that's just where Mary Smith and I saw you walking the first day of school," broke in Kitty Westervelt eagerly, "with a man."

Nancy Lester nodded hastily. "It's a very favorite walk of mine and Mother's and Mr. Bob's," she said, and then without the slightest pause or quiver of self-consciousness hurried on with her tale. "But yesterday I wished I hadn't gone that way. School was out, and the low sun shone in the schoolhouse windows, and I could see the teacher alone inside. She was sitting by her desk, with her head on her arm, and she shook all over with crying. I'd noticed before," explained Nancy Lester, "that she's a very *little* teacher. She

doesn't look big enough to go round among all those noisy children. But I've noticed they all love her." She paused for breath.

"Go on, please," cried Mary Smith eagerly.

"I went in," said Nancy Lester. "I—don't ever cry myself. If I did, I'm sure I should want to do it alone. But even if I embarrassed her, I couldn't bear to let her stay there like that. She looked as if she'd been doing it alone for ages. So I went in. And I walked right up to her and touched her arm, before she heard me. I said I was sorry. And after a while—that doesn't matter," elided Nancy Lester skilfully, "she told me that her little sister is very sick somewhere up in northern Maine, where they live, and she can't afford to go to see her. It's an expensive trip, and if she goes away she has to give all her salary to a substitute. It's such a very little salary that no substitute will take less," explained Nancy Lester.

"And can we give her the money?" asked Lloyd quickly.

Nancy Lester smiled at the girl whose father was always urging her to spend more money than she ever could find a use for. "Nothing quite so easy as that, Lloyd. She's a proud little teacher, you see. She wouldn't even borrow the money. But she would let us teach for her for a week and not insist on paying us. She'd do it

that way because she loves teaching so and we might never have another chance, so she'd like us to have this one. And besides the regular substitute is cross to the littlest children."

"Oh, what fun!" cried Nancy Lee excitedly. "Will Miss Marshall let us?"

"Are you perfectly sure the little teacher will let us?" asked cautious Lloyd.

"Oh, yes," said Nancy Lester quickly, "because that is what delayed me. While they were all busily eating their dessert at Mother's luncheon, I ran down to see her. And after a little while—that doesn't matter—she said yes."

"And is there French to teach?" asked Jeanne anxiously, "because it is all I know."

"You can teach the littlest ones to read and to play games—the pretty French games you showed us, that the children in your village play."

"I can't teach anything," sighed Lloyd and Plain Mary Smith in unison.

"Lloyd, you can teach them about wild flowers," decreed little Miss Lester magisterially. "And Mary, aren't you good at geography?"

Jane rose briskly. "I'll be one to go and interview Miss Marshall," she said. "Who wants to come along?"

"I will," Nancy Lee promised. "But first I want to ask Nancy Lester something. You said

you knew something we could do for Grace. Is this—I don't quite understand. Did you just happen to notice this other thing that was more necessary?"

Nancy Lester turned her deep eyes wonderingly upon the inquirer. "Oh, no," she said in her lovely voice, "I didn't change to something else. This is the thing I meant all along. Don't you think that if we send this girl home to her little suffering sister it will be the most beautiful memorial we could build for Grace? Flowers and marble—those are the things people generally give to the dead, but I think that Grace would like better a monument of kindness. She would like all the things we wish we might have done for her piled up in a great heap of kindnesses and then given away, as we have chances to give them, beginning with this gift of our time and our brains to the little teacher. That's the kind of monument I should like best, oh, very much best, shouldn't you, Nancy dear, and Jane, and the others?"

"Noticing Nancy," said Jane Learned with a break in her voice, "you're—you're—oh, I can't say it! Come along, Nancy Lee, quick, and get this monument started."

CHAPTER IX

A STAB IN THE DARK

THE letter was written in German script—the real thing, Kittie Westervelt, who had been low-graded in German, pronounced it sadly. It was addressed, at the beginning, simply to *Madame.* Kittie found it in the hall outside Miss Dutton's recitation room, held it up for its owner to claim, and then, when it was not claimed, began to read it, in the hope that thus she might find a clue to its ownership. The German script piqued her easy curiosity, but the German idiom baffled her unpersevering skill.

"Here, Mildred," she said, "you're the German shark—I mean, prod—I mean our best German scholar." Kittie sighed deeply. "This Anti-Slang Society keeps one thinking every minute. The point is, I found this note on the stairs, Mildred, and perhaps if you read a little of it, you'll know whose it is."

Mildred took the note and puckered her smooth brow over it. "I hope it doesn't say that a bomb is going to be dropped in this school," she said

idly, "because of all the brothers we've got fighting with the Allies. Still if it does say that, we ought to know about it." Mildred's voice went flat suddenly. Then every bit of color left her face. "Where did you find this—thing?" she demanded of Kittie.

Kittie explained hastily. "Whatever is the matter, Mildred? Can you tell whose it is yet?"

"Wait," commanded Mildred, and turned her full attention back to the note. "Anna? Anna?" she repeated at last questioningly. "I can't remember an Anna in this school. This note belongs to 'Anna's' mother and it's full of the most awful plots and schemes, but not to be carried out at the school, Kittie, so don't be frightened. *Is* there an Anna in this school?"

Kittie considered swiftly. "Not one. Six Dorothys and four Mabels and seven Marys and two Nancys ——"

"And but one Phyllis, thank heaven!" broke in a scornful drawl. It was Phyllis Knight, who had sauntered up in time, evidently, to hear Mildred's question and so catch the drift of Kittie's answer.

Kittie didn't like Phyllis, who had taken no interest, and assumed none, in the hidden engagement ring. "You needn't be so select," she said. "The Dorothys have a secret society that they

say is heaps of fun, and the Mabels are all good friends, and Nancy Lee says she loves having a namesake. So should I."

Phyllis shrugged. "You can easily find one, if some girl will accommodatingly change her name to Kittie, the way the little Lester did."

Kittie stared incredulously. "Girls can't change their names," she said. "You can have nicknames, of course. My name is Katherine, but I've always been called ——"

"I understand all that," Phyllis broke in curtly. "The little Lester's nickname was Annetta; adopted name, Nancy; real name—Anna."

"Oh, are you sure?" cried Mildred Wallace in a voice of alarm.

"She can't possibly be sure," declared Kittie magisterially, "because she's wrong. I remember positively Nancy Lee's telling me that Nancy Lester was named for her Grandmother Lester, and it was all in the family Bible. So there, Phyllis!"

Phyllis shrugged, smiling her most disagreeable smile. "I suppose N. Lee saw the writing in the Bible," she sneered.

Kittie started. "No-o, she didn't," she admitted reluctantly. "The Bible was locked up in a trunk in their attic, I remember she said, and Mr. Bob—he's their stunning friend—took the key to France with him by mistake."

Phyllis fixed Kittie with a scoffing glance. "I suppose you don't see anything fishy in that story," she said. "If not, you'd better think it over. And *while* you're thinking, just return the little Lester her mother's letter. The way she acts about it may get your brain to working better." Phyllis wheeled and went swiftly off, making no response whatever to Kittie's almost tearful pleading that she come back and explain—all sorts of things.

In lieu of help from Phyllis, Kittie's next idea was to go to Nancy Lee with the note and the story. Nancy listened eagerly while Mildred read the mysterious and vague but certainly suspicious and even alarming epistle.

"It doesn't say anything definite when you come to think it over," she said at last. "And as for Phyllis's idea, that's perfectly absurd. You give Nancy Lester the note, just as Phyllis said, and see what happens. Anna indeed!" Nancy laughed merrily. "Phyllis has a regular dime-novel imagination," she declared gaily. "Christina Learned is always getting hold of wild ideas like this, and between the two of them they must have gone actually crazy."

"Did you ever see Mrs. Lester, Nancy?" asked Mildred pointedly.

"No-o," said Nancy. "No, I haven't. But

she's great. Everything Nancy Lester tells about her shows it. And she's pretty, and she dresses beautifully."

"How do you know that, Nancy?" demanded Kittie, always interested in fine feathers.

"Because Nancy Lester says so," returned Nancy Lee promptly.

"Oh!" Kittie's eagerness subsided. "She's so sort of enthusiastic. She's the kind that would be sure to think that her own mother was beautiful and well-dressed. But she hasn't any style herself, so very likely her mother hasn't."

Nancy laughed. "Maybe, but that's really not to the point, is it? Give Nancy the letter, Kittie. I'd like to get the best of Phyllis Knight for once."

"All right. I shall see her this afternoon at the red schoolhouse," agreed Kittie. "I'm getting along splendidly with the Advanced Arithmetic," she added importantly. "Those children haven't 'stuck' me once yet."

"Don't boast," advised Nancy sadly. "I was all right till this morning with my English grammar, but to-day I got all mixed up trying to explain about 'hadn't ought.' Of course I knew it was wrong," she added hastily, "but I couldn't for the life of me think why. It was lucky Miss Dutton was around. I just put my pride in my pocket and went and found out."

"I don't believe children think any the less of a teacher who doesn't know everything," said Mildred. "But if you pretend to and don't, they just delight in making you own up. I'm going to remember that when I'm really teaching—if I ever do."

Nancy sighed. "I wish I could go there again this afternoon! I shan't ever really teach, I guess. There's too much to do at home, and Mother's counting on getting a good rest as soon as I'm through school. Besides, I'm too poor at it. But it's certainly fascinating to try."

"Isn't it, though?" agreed Jane Learned, who had sauntered in just as Nancy finished. "Noticing Nancy's little teacher is the best substitute for Timmy that we've struck yet. I shall never forget her face when Lloyd handed her the Wonder-box of toys for her little sick sister."

"She was sweet about it, wasn't she?" said Nancy. "Jane, do you have an afternoon class to teach to-day?"

Jane nodded. "Primary geography—islands of the Pacific—perfectly fascinating and just in my line. Plenty of romance and excitement, you know, what with pirates and palm groves and coral insects and cannibals."

Nancy looked her envy. "I don't care anything about your romantic old islands," she

sighed, "but I do want to be on hand this afternoon to see Kittie and Mildred put Phyllis in her place."

"How?" demanded Jane eagerly.

The story was told again, the note re-translated, and Jane heartily seconded Nancy's plan for the discomfiture of Phyllis.

"She's due at school this afternoon, I'm sure," said Jane, "and I'll manage to have her around for the grand dénouement. Too bad about you, Nancy, but we'll tell you every word that's spoken and every look that's passed."

"And every shrug," added Mildred laughingly.

"Phyllis's shrug will be on the other shoulder this time," declared Jane positively. "And that will please nobody better than yours truly. I didn't mind being beaten in the genius debate, specially as winning said debate has made a new girl out of Plain Mary. But I did mind being twitted about losing it by Phyllis Knight. Hope I get a good chance to-day to twit back."

But dinner-time found what Jane called the Anti-Phyllis pro-Lester party in a state of deep dejection and worried chagrin. Nancy Lester, upon being proffered the note by Kittie, who explained that she had picked it up and couldn't find an owner among the school boarders, glanced

at it rather casually and tucked it into the pocket of her blue serge dress.

"It must be the one my mother complained this noon about losing," she said, and when Kittie asked pointedly, "Are you sure it's hers?" Nancy Lester only smiled vaguely and said, "I don't drop her things about for her often; I'm sure I don't. She accused Mary Ann of throwing it away when she dusted, and Mary Ann is so cross about it that there probably won't be any dinner so I'd better hurry right back and settle things." Whereupon she departed in her usual whirlwind fashion.

"I saw to it that Phyllis was there," Jane told Nancy sadly. "So she got her chance to shrug all right, and the way she's crowing now she'll surely turn into a certain bird. But that won't help us any. Kittie is all for telling Miss Marshall."

Nancy considered. "The letter was pretty vague, but it did sound dangerous. Why, Jane Learned, it can't be that the Lesters are spies—pro-German spies and plotters. You know it can't! There's something wrong somewhere. Let's get Kittie to wait till morning before she bothers Miss Marshall about something that just simply can't be so."

Sure enough, morning brought its new development in the Lester case. Nancy Lester hurried

up to Kittie before History class, holding the horrid, blue-tinted note out in front of her. "What can you think of me?" she sighed. "This is not my mother's lost letter. I found that in the ash-can where Mary Ann had thrown it,—just in time to forestall the ashman's carrying it off forever. So Mother was then pacified and I managed to pacify Mary Ann also, and next time, I assure you, I shall not go by the color of the paper when I claim a lost letter."

Short-sightedly, Kittie rushed to Phyllis Knight with her recovered letter, to be told, naturally, that she was "an easy mark." "And the little Lester and her mother are pretty clumsy blunderers, I should say," added Phyllis, "to try to pull out now, when the trap is sprung. Of course this was Mrs. Lester's lost letter, but equally of course Mrs. Lester would never have claimed it, and she was stupid enough to send stupid little daughter back with it."

"Oh, Phyllis ——" began Kittie angrily.

"Don't 'oh Phyllis' me," retorted that young person airily. "Furthermore, if it interests you, I am pleased to be able to state that Mrs. Lester gets a blue note, with a New York postmark and a handwriting unmistakably foreign—I won't be more definite on that point—every single morning of her life."

"Oh, how do you know that?" gasped the simple-minded Kittie.

Phyllis smiled her satisfaction at the impression she had made. "Never mind how I know. I know all right. And I don't depend for my information on the little Lester's chatter about locked-up family Bibles."

When Jane heard what Phyllis Knight "knew" about Mrs. Lester's mail, she made Kittie tell it all over twice, and then she offended Kittie's sensibilities greatly by walking off in one of her impenetrable silences. When Nancy Lee, later in the day, demanded to know what Jane thought now about the Lester case, as Jane called it, Jane was not much more communicative.

"I'm stumped, N. Lee," she declared inelegantly. "I used to think I was some detective —or that the firm was, anyhow. But nowadays ——" Jane waved away any further reference to the twins' estrangement. "Well, anyhow, this Lester case is a bit too much for me. All I'm sure of is, Phyllis Knight *knows too much.* That's where I've started, N. Lee, and I sincerely hope it won't be where I stop."

"It won't," said Nancy Lee confidently. "Since you've been Jane A. A., you certainly get things done. I mean you do what you set out to. But I hope," added Nancy, with a sudden recollection

of a certain adventure of her own, based on the high-sounding sentiment aforesaid, "that none of the things you set out to do will give you such an agonizing afternoon as I had getting home from Little Bubble with Timmy. But then of course Timmy was worth it."

"Downing Phyllis will be worth it," declared Jane. "Oh, dear, I really don't mean to be vindictive about Phyllis! I'll try to change and work for Noticing Nancy, instead of against Phyllis. Helping out Noticing Nancy Namesake is certainly worth almost anything. She's Nancy-All-Alone to a heart-breaking extent, especially just now; so I feel as if she was Jane A. A.'s special job."

"I'll help all I can, because she's my namesake," chimed in Nancy.

But for the present the Lester case seemed at a deadlock, and the absorbing question, with answers that changed with every passing hour and every slightest move of Miss Marshall's barometer, was the weather for the Ten-School Winter Sport Carnival. They would hold it anyhow at the appointed date, weather or no weather, but if there wasn't snow enough for skiing and sliding, or ice right for skating, the only sports available seemed to be hockey, paper chases, and indoor basket-ball; and they were not wintry enough to appeal strongly

to Fair Oaks. Incidentally Fair Oaks was poor at hockey and mediocre at basket-ball, but very, very good at fast and fancy skating and fairly good at skiing. Coasting was not to be competitive, but it would be great fun. Phyllis Knight and Lloyd Mallory were Fair Oaks' best fancy skaters. Lloyd was to race on skates, as was a thin little girl named Dorothy Wilmer. Jane Learned and Nancy Lee and two of the Mabels were to compete in the skiing events.

Two days before the contest it rained, and then it froze, making a hard, icy crust over a foot or more of snow. But the ice on the pond was rough and the girls were in despair about the skating events when Mrs. Tom Grant, a townswoman who took a great interest in girls' outdoor sports—it was she who had organized the town girls' archery club and got them to challenge Fair Oaks—sent word that her three outdoor men were idling about the place and could just as well as not come up and flood the Fair Oaks pond.

"Don't thank me. I want to see the fancy skating," explained Mrs. Grant briskly. "We'll have a perfect rink for you, if this cold snap holds."

It held. The night before the meet two inches of snow fell, enough to cover the icy crust and make ideal skiing conditions. And

the pond was easily swept off by Mrs. Grant's three idlers.

It wasn't exactly a Ten-School Meet; in the end only six schools were represented, each by from four to eight girls. But that was enough for plenty of excitement.

The skating events came first. Lloyd Mallory lost a skate and the race, when it seemed as if she had victory in her grasp; and little Dorothy Wilmer never had a chance. But Lloyd took two "seconds" on the figures Dick Lee had taught her, and Phyllis Knight, skimming the ice like a bright-winged bird in her white and gold sweater and cap, with her tasseled scarf flying out behind her—Phyllis took every single "first" on the program and then gave a special exhibition of extra figures, while the banks of the little lake rang with admiring applause.

"Isn't that just like her?" said Jane to Nancy Lee, as they went off together for their skis. "She always wins."

"Well, I'm glad Fair Oaks won," said Nancy. "Of course I wish —— Oh, dear, I suppose it's just because she's so good at things that she comes out ahead so often. I suppose we ought to set to and be equally good at things ourselves. Aren't you scared, Jane? I never thought so many people would be watching!"

"We've got to win, Nancy," said Jane solemnly, "people or no people. Don't look at the crowd. Just ski."

Nancy nodded, also solemnly. There was plenty of strenuous fighting spirit in the hearts of the Fair Oaks skiing team. The faces of the two Mabels were as set and eager as Jane's and Nancy's.

The Mabels went down first, with several girls from other schools between. One Mabel slipped ignominiously at the start and one of her skis, unaccompanied, finished the race in record time. The other Mabel did fairly well, but not well enough to win.

"I'll get your ski," said Phyllis Knight to the Mabel who had ignominiously lost it. "Oh, no, I'm not a bit tired—just happy."

"Keep off the tracks," warned somebody, as she started down the hill, and Phyllis turned and waved her gold-fringed scarf-end tauntingly, as if to say, "Trust me!"

It only took her a minute to slide down to the lost ski, but coming up hill, breaking through the crust that the sun had softened at every step, was slow work. Phyllis loitered along, watching the races, and using the ski as a cane. Two girls went down, one making the record run so far. Then it was Jane's turn. Phyllis, intent on the skiing, had edged closer and closer to the track.

Suddenly she slipped and fell, floundering on the steep hillside for a footing. On her knees on the ground, she grasped the ski and plunged it deep into the snow to pull herself up by. It slipped and went sidewise into the snow, ploughing along under the crust close to the race track. Gingerly Phyllis pulled it out, stood up and walked easily on to the starting point. Nobody had noticed her particularly. They were watching Jane, who was buckling on her skis for the start. Only Jane, whose mind and eyes should have been all on buckles, was watching Phyllis, staring at Phyllis who was coming up the hill and staring, in her turn, with her hard, insolent smile, at Jane. One ski buckled, Jane wheeled, looking for Miss MacPherson, who was just behind her.

"What's the matter, Jane?" asked Miss MacPherson kindly.

"Oh, Miss MacPherson, I think—oh, nothing! I'm just about ready." Back wheeled Jane, and without another glance at Phyllis buckled the other ski and started down. Jane was just reckless enough to be a splendid skier. Perfectly balanced, daringly relaxed, she gave herself a dashing start and flew—shot down the hill. Tense, yet swaying a little, her head back, her eyes shining with happy excitement, on she flew.

"She's *skiing*," announced Mrs. Tom Grant, in

her loud, pleasant voice. "Hasn't this been a day, though?"

Just as Mrs. Grant spoke, Jane had reached the place in the ski track opposite to where Phyllis had fallen. Her lithe figure stiffened suddenly, twisted, strained for its lost poise, and, failing to find it, crashed down face forward on the cruel ski ends. In an instant Miss MacPherson was beside her, lifting her up, wiping the blood from a cut on her cheek, and applying a first-aid bandage from the supply she always carried in her capacious pocket. And in a minute more Jane was up, declaring that she wasn't hurt a bit, only scratched, brushing off the snow, laughingly lamenting the rent in the front breadth of her new tweed skirt, and the worse rent in Fair Oaks' skiing record.

There was to be no more skiing, Miss Marshall reluctantly decided. It was too late to try out a new track; Jane's fall had effectually demolished the old one, making a rough spot that was very dangerous to other skiers; and Jane had demonstrated, too, the unhappy chances of a fascinating sport. Nancy Lee tried hard not to look or to feel dejected, as, without having had her chance to fight for Fair Oaks, she congratulated the Overmere skiers on their victory. She had been deputed to escort them to the gym, where, at the

end of the afternoon, the visitors were to be entertained with dancing and what Jane, before the days of the Anti-Slang Society, always referred to as "real food," because her favorite orange ice was included in the menu.

"Come and help me wash up, Nancy Lee." It was Jane, murmuring confidentially in Nancy's ear. "It won't take a minute. Miss Mac's fancy bandage has stopped the bleeding, and she says I needn't be a spectre—or a spectacle—at the feast any longer."

Nancy went gladly. She couldn't—simply couldn't talk polite nothings to the Overmere girls for another minute. She abandoned them to Kittie, who arose nobly to her opportunity for making an impression.

"I say, Nancy," Jane began slowly, when they had reached the seclusion of the Senior House's third floor. "I say, did you—that is—oh, I hate to say it!"

"Go ahead. I shan't care."

"It's not the kind of thing you think, Nancy; it's nothing personal to you. It's—well, did you notice anything—anything crooked about the race—the track, I should say."

"Why, the track was straight as an arrow, Jane," said Nancy in a queer, constrained voice.

"Oh, yes, of course. I don't mean that kind of

crooked. Nancy, you're awfully dense to-day. What I mean, calling a spade a spade, is this: did you or didn't you think that where I tripped I was—made to trip?" Jane had blurted it out at last.

"Jane Learned," said Nancy Lee solemnly, "when Phyllis Knight twisted that ski around under the snow, on the pretext of helping herself up with it, she was jabbing it straight into the honor of Fair Oaks School. I'm sure of it. Why didn't you say something before you started down?"

"I thought of it," Jane admitted, "but I tried to be a good sport and take my chances," she went on forlornly. Then her eyes flashed suddenly. "Oh, Nancy, Nancy, what must it be to go through life hating like that—hating enough to stab the honor of your school in the dark!"

"We must find how she stabbed Nancy Lester," said Nancy Lee solemnly. "Because of course this makes us surer than ever that she did do just that. And right at present we must go back to the gym and act—gay and—hospitable, and talk to the visitors as if we meant what we said. Nobody outside must suspect. That's something we can do for the honor of Fair Oaks, Jane,—guard it from suspicion. But, oh, Jane, *isn't* it awful to hate like that? Why, it's as bad as making war—worse, for

it's more like being a traitor! Now, Jane, let's not forget to smile."

"All right," agreed Jane. "I'm grinning like a Cheshire cat this minute, for practice. It hurts my cheek rather, but never mind a little thing like that."

Catching Nancy's hand, Jane started off on a mad race for the gym, where the sacred honor of Fair Oaks was to be defended—by a smile and a jest and the gay bantering of polite nothings with the girls on the visiting teams.

CHAPTER X

"THE PLAY'S THE THING!"

"THERE'S no question what to do about this ski episode," announced Jane Learned with decision. "Keep mum. Consider the oyster, thou babbler, and be mum. Nobody else but us knows. Nobody else has guessed. First the Cheshire cat and then the oyster; thus is the trick turned, thus the sacred honor of Fair Oaks protected."

It was the end of evening study hour. Jane, who had smiled so strenuously at the gym that she had opened the cut on her face again, had been put to bed before dinner, by Miss MacPherson's orders. The sick and the maimed need not observe study hours. Jane had delighted her soul—and tired her eyes—over a badly printed copy of "Vanity Fair." Just before study-hours were over, she had crept to her door and stuck out a sign to guard her solitude against invaders. "Too seedy" (crossed out and "used up" substituted) "to see callers. Will N. Lee please bring back my History note-book?" By this canny device Jane had made possible a private interview with Nancy

—very brief it must be, so as not to arouse suspicion.

"All right," Nancy agreed reluctantly to Jane's oyster proposal. "I suppose keeping mum is the only thing to do. But doesn't it just make your blood boil to have Phyllis Knight do a thing like that and get away with it? That's slang, Jane Learned, and I don't care, either. She'll be chuckling to herself all over the place, and crowing worse than ever, thinking that she's taken us all in."

"Um-m." Jane rubbed her plastered cheek slowly. "I don't think we'll let her think quite that, not for very long anyhow, N. Lee. It wouldn't be good for her. Honestly, Nancy, I'm trying hard not to hate her even a little and not to want to injure her,—just to be fair to her. But—you see, Nancy, she's my special protégée. I got her name on one of Miss Marshall's old slips away back last fall. Ever so many times I've thought I'd go to Miss Marshall and give her up—tell her I just couldn't be responsible for a girl like Phyllis, and add some details. But I hated to, when of course she'd think it was all because of Christina that I was down on Phyllis. So I've still got her to look after, and it does honestly seem to me, Nancy, that it's only fair to her to tell her what you and I know."

"Yes, Jane, I think so, too," agreed Nancy sol-

emnly. "She might not be so ready to do things like that if she finds she may be caught. And Jane, can't you try to get her to do something about the Lester case?"

"I'll try," Jane promised. "I shall probably get hopping mad the first thing and mess up the whole job. Wish you had it, N. Lee."

"I have got the Lester end of it," Nancy reminded her. "Besides being my namesake, she's my special protégée, and—oh, dear, now I've told again! Nancy Lester's was the name on my slip, Jane, and I don't in the least mind your knowing it, for I'm sure she wouldn't."

Jane nodded gravely. "Sort of makes us partners on this deal, doesn't it? You'd better skip, N. Lee. Pat my wound in passing, and you can tell curious inquirers that you stayed on a bit to fix me up for the night."

The day after the athletic meet promised to be a "morning-after"-ish time. Everybody was cross at breakfast, depressed by the unhappy consciousness of badly prepared lessons and no joyous excitement ahead. Miss Marshall saw what had happened and wisely provided an instant antidote. Morning Assembly was thrilled by an announcement, flatteringly addressed to Miss Jane Learned, president of the Anti-Slang Society.

"The Fair Oaks faculty," Miss Marshall ex-

plained, "feel that your suggestion of an Anti-Slang Society has brilliantly justified itself. We even go so far as to believe that the school's progress on the thorny path of English, not as she often is, but as she always ought to be spoken, deserves some sort of recognition,—what you girls call, I think, a grand celebration."

Little ecstatic murmurs of "Oh!" and "Ah!" and one heartfelt, undignified "Goodie!" filled Miss Marshall's pause. Then Jane A. A. arose to the occasion.

"We are proud that our faculty likes us," she grinned affably, "and of course we'd love to celebrate. Have you thought how to do it, or is that for us to see to?"

Jane's perfectly respectful, but decidedly off-hand manner put a twinkle into Miss Marshall's fine eyes. "We had thought that a play might fill the bill," she answered. "Parts to be competed for before a faculty committee, and assigned according to the candidate's voice, enunciation, pronunciation, and vocabulary, as shown in a brief recitation or reading. If you girls are sufficiently interested to appreciate expert training, you shall have a professional coach—a voice specialist—for the play, and we'll try to produce it creditably before an audience of our friends."

Of course they wanted to give a play. The

stage has a glamour that outlasts even youth and youth's egoistic enthusiasms. And after preliminary trials before Miss Dutton, who in their unenlightened days they had wrathfully denominated "a perfect crank" about voice culture, they decided that they certainly wanted the specialist to train them. Miss Dutton had made them see how nasal were some of their tones, how badly "placed" their vowels, how flat and colorless and crude their speaking voices. And then she had made them listen to Nancy Lester, whose voice was low and sweet and full of thrills. The voice specialist, she told them, would help them to speak like that. Little Nancy Lester suddenly assumed importance in Fair Oaks circles. Before the final trials for parts had as much as begun, it was evident that she,—and not the Dorothy who had prided herself on her elocutionary training, or the Mabel who had acted in "lots of cute plays" at home in Columbus, Ohio,—would earn the right to star in the Fair Oaks Anti-Slang Society play.

And all the time that these things were going on, little Nancy Lester, pleased in a childlike, unself-conscious way by Miss Dutton's approval and the girls' sudden interest in her, nevertheless went her unperturbed way as usual, arriving for engagements at the last minute or worse, and always departing homeward in hot haste, with explana-

tions tossed back over her shoulder about Mary Ann's "cantankerousness," her mother's tea parties, a promise to visit the teacher at the little red schoolhouse, or just a vague, "There's something I have to see about to-day. No, I can do it all alone this time, thank you!" She was tremendously interested in the play—it was Mr. Yeats's lovely "Land of Heart's Desire" that had finally been chosen.

"I adore poetry that sings," she confided solemnly to her dear friends, Jane, Lloyd, and Nancy Lee. "And I adore fairies. I believe in them. Do you? I never saw one though. A lady from London who came once to visit my mother said that she sees them—oh, almost any time and anywhere. I asked her if she'd ever touched one, but she said no, she could have many times, only she was afraid it would frighten the little people away from her—she always called them the little people. She knows Mr. Yeats, who wrote our play. She was not very pretty and she was quite fat, but oh, she was entertaining!" Nancy Lester sighed ecstatically over the happy memory.

"But Nancy Lester, did she really see fairies? Do you really believe she did?" demanded practical Nancy Lee.

Little Miss Lester smiled her vague meditative

smile. "Well, I've often wondered about that very thing," she admitted. "She was an artist, you see, and artists of course see a great many little things that other people don't notice, or else they couldn't paint. She painted very fairylike pictures, I must say, so perhaps she could see into fairy land better than the rest of the world. But when I tell you that I believe in fairies," explained Nancy Lester with candor, "I mean I believe in—in—why, in the goodness and the loveliness and the little charmingness of fairies and fairy things. Charmingness isn't a proper word, I'm afraid. It's very hard to say what I mean, but it's like this: the fairy part of life is what makes you want to take life right up in your arms and hug it—like babies and birds and some flowers (but not the big flaming ones) and some grown-up people—people like my mother, you know—oh, you don't any of you know her, but I wish you all did! Some day soon I'm going to ask her to have a party for you." An odd, rather fairylike smile played over Nancy Lester's mobile face. "When grown-up people are the fairylike kind, they're sometimes—quite—a little trouble. The lady from London wouldn't get up to breakfasts and sometimes not to luncheon. And my moth——" Nancy paused swiftly. "But they're worth all the trouble they make and more," she ended loyally, "just like babies, and

even more so, because you have to look forward a good deal with babies. I've been helping our washwoman with her newest one, you see; that's why I have babies so much on my mind right at present."

And before Lloyd, who adored babies, could demand details of the washerwoman's, Noticing Nancy Lester had flitted off to some of the numerous preoccupations that filled her hurried days.

Besides the Voice that sings outside, and the Fairy Chorus, there are only six speaking characters in "The Land of Heart's Desire." But there are also the "little queer old woman cloaked in green" and the "little queer old man in a green coat," two fays who come to the cottage door, one "to beg a porringer of milk," the other "a burning sod to light his pipe." These two are seen by nobody in the cottage but Maire Bruin, who answers their knocks; but by arranging the stage so that the audience could look out through the cottage door over Maire's shoulder, two more girls could be utilized on the stage, and the interesting problems involved in costumes for elderly fairies added zest to the Costume Committee's labors. Cast, Costume Committee, Staging Committee, and a Reception Committee, to have charge of seating the school guests and providing light refreshments for them after the play, gave a chance

for every Fair Oaks girl to work for the success of the Anti-Slang celebration.

"Of course we'd all like to act," said Plain Mary Smith, who was chairman of the Reception Committee, "but we can't, so it's lucky for the people who are coming to listen that we aren't going to try. If there are six girls in Fair Oaks School who can act, we're lucky; and the rest of us ought to pull our oars wherever we can."

Mary's loyal spirit was duplicated nearly everywhere; and one reason for this was the popularity —accidental but fortunate—of the girls whose dramatic ability and good voices had won them the six coveted places as actors. Nancy Lester was Maire Bruin, the unhappy, misfit little Irish bride, who hates the elderly wisdom of her law-relations and her husband's humdrum peasant ways, and longs with lonely, aching heart for her girlhood's lost freedom. Nancy Lester wasn't exactly popular at Fair Oaks, but she was admired, now that the charm of her voice had been duly discovered to the school; so nobody begrudged her her part. Jane was Maurteen Bruin, the wise, kindly old father, who loves Maire and tries to protect her from his wife's bitter tongue; it was fitting, of course, that the president and founder of the Anti-Slang Society should appear in its play. Lloyd was Shawn

Bruin, Maire's dull, kind husband; Lloyd was tall and could affect a very manly carriage, and the stupid, kindly air that should be Shawn's came easily to her; everybody was glad that Lloyd, who had tried so hard at voice culture, should have won a part. Another big girl—a placid, stout Middle-Westerner—was Father Hart, the kindly old priest, who tries to win Maire's confidence and save her from the fairies' spell. Nancy Lee, to her complete astonishment and great delight, got the part of Bridget, Shawn's tart-tongued, bitter old mother, who thinks Maire lazy and vain and is angry at her husband's and son's indulgence of the girl; and Mildred Wallace, with her sweet mobile face, golden curls, and naive, childlike manner was the Faery Child, who comes to the Irish cottage on May Eve, the fairies' night, tempts Maire to go with her to ride the winds and dance on the mountains, and then flits away, just as poor little lonely-hearted Maire dies, with the sound of fairy songs in her ears.

"Isn't it all lovely?" sighed Mildred Wallace at the end of the first reading of the play by the newly appointed caste. "It's sad enough to make you cry, and yet it's happy too."

"It's much too fanciful to cry over," declared Jane. "I, Maurteen Bruin, refuse to cry over fairies and their spells."

"It's fanciful, but it's real too," insisted Mildred. "I, the Faery Child, am not exactly a fairy. I'm all the things—happiness and prettiness and love and freedom to wander in the woods and lie in the sun—I'm all the things Maire wanted and poor old Shawn—Lloyd here, who loved her so,—couldn't give her because he didn't know how. And Maire dies of a broken heart."

"Because nobody understands," added little Nancy Lester, who had listened breathlessly to what the others had said. "Nobody understands and nobody cares—oh, Shawn-Lloyd cares in his dull way, and Father Maurteen-Jane loves Maire a little; but they don't *really* care—not enough to sit down and think hard how to give her what she wants so much, and then to go out and get it for her. They could, you know, if they'd really cared!"

Jane nodded solemnly. "That's exactly it, Noticing Nancy. As usual, you understand. Too bad you didn't inhabit County Sligo in Maire's day. Then she'd have got her freedom and her chance to sit in the sun, and she and Shawn-Lloyd would have lived happy ever after, and I'd have divorced Crosspatch Bridget-Nancy, or fed her to the fairies on a May Eve, and come to live with you and be happy ever after myself."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Bridget-Nancy sadly.

"You all see so many things in this play that I never should think of! I never was any good at seeing into poetry, and as for fairies, especially those that stand for something, as Mildred says this Faery Child does!" Nancy ended with a shrug, a comical face, and a gesture of despair. "All I have hopes of doing is to learn my part," she added solemnly.

"Well, that's pretty important," decreed Jane. "We'd all better tend up to it promptly too, if we're to know our lines by Saturday. Whew! that's only four days off. Luckily I'm quick at committing."

"Unluckily I'm not," sighed Lloyd.

"My part is short," said Mildred.

"So is mine," Eloise Mason, who was Father Hart, congratulated herself.

Little Nancy Lester said nothing; she was too occupied with trying to think of any possible time in her life between now and Saturday that she could, by any stretch of the imagination, plan to devote to learning Maire's part. It hadn't occurred to her—it didn't even now, when the reading was over—that she was the "star" of the Anti-Slang play. But with her fine sense of artistic proportion and finish she realized that her part counted with all the rest. And it must be learned thoroughly; somehow, with a play as beautiful as

"The Land of Heart's Desire," forgetting a phrase or fumbling for a word was unthinkable. But Mary Ann was in the dumps with a bad cold, and Mrs. Lester was leaving for New York Saturday on the early train. She was going to receive at a tea on the opening day of an art exhibition, in a lovely black lace gown, made over a shimmery blue that just matched her wonderful eyes. She had torn the lace sleeve of the dress at the last dinner she wore it to, and nobody could mend it properly but Nancy.

"Annetta is a wonderful needlewoman," her mother used to say sometimes, stressing the word "wonderful" in her voice that was like Nancy's, only richer and fuller. "She mends me up like new. See, she's doing it now, while I sit and watch and wish I were half as deft at it."

Nancy wanted sometimes to answer, "Why don't you try, Mother?" But she never did. She loved to mend beautiful things—it was the same as making, almost. Only it did take so much time! Nancy Lester picked up her book of the play and said good-bye in her usual hurried fashion. There is never any time like the present, she knew, for beginning to mend.

And this is why, at the Saturday rehearsal, Maire Bruin-Nancy did not know her part. She did not begin to know it. But she did not spoil

the poetry by fumbling. Coolly, without apology or explanation, she read all her lines after the first long speech. She read them well, and she made Lloyd's eyes fill with tears by the feeling she threw into that first speech. But this did not alter the fact that she—the star of the play—had shirked her responsibility, and then ignored the fact.

The cast talked it over after she had gone; the first rehearsal, being merely to see that all were letter-perfect, had been left entirely in the cast's hands, with Plain Mary Smith, who was a painfully accurate person, to act as prompter and call attention to the smallest error.

"She can't begin like this," said Jane severely. "It's keeping us all back."

"Oh, well, she'll surely be ready next time," easy-going Mildred apologized.

"How can you be sure of that?" objected Eloise Mason, who knew Nancy Lester less than the others did and was too matter-of-fact to understand her at all.

"Somebody ought to tell her, I think," announced Plain Mary. "She never said a word to show that she knew she wasn't doing things right. Some of you ought to let her know what you expect of her."

"I will," Nancy Lee promised hastily. "I ought —I mean—oh, I know her best, maybe. Jane

would do it better, but I'm afraid she'd scare her too much. Besides—I'll do it."

"Be sure you scare her enough," said Eloise severely. "When will you do it?"

Nancy flushed angrily at Eloise's implication that she, like her namesake, was irresponsible. "To-morrow," she promised curtly. "I'll ask Miss Marshall for permission to go there to-morrow afternoon and I'll tell her that she must brace up—do better."

"Good for you!" said Jane briefly. "That settles that. Now let's go find the costume committee and be measured for peasant smocks, et cetera."

The next afternoon at exactly four o'clock, which seemed to Nancy Lee the most polite hour for a call, she pulled up the old brass knocker on the weather-worn door of the Lesters' weather-stained little old house, and when it slammed down again her heart went down with it, into her boots. For hadn't Nancy Lester said, time and again, that she couldn't ask the girls to come and see her, because her mother mustn't be disturbed? And yet how else could she secure the quiet, downright talk with her namesake that seemed necessary to make the play a certain success? So it was a relief, a minute after the knocker had ceased its brazen clangor, to have Nancy Lester herself open the

door, her face wreathed in smiles and her hands held out to welcome her caller.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you!" she cried, drawing Nancy inside the door. "Sunday is such a still day, and this Sunday I'm all by myself. That is, Mary Ann is asleep up-stairs, poor thing, deaf as a post from her awful cold; and my mother is in New York. Give me your coat." She helped Nancy off with her wrap and led her into a tiny reception-room off the hall. It was a yellow room, with soft creamy yellow walls and hangings, wicker chairs with yellow cushions, and a great bowl of daffodils on a small table by the window. Nancy noticed, remembering all her and Jane's wonderments about Nancy's plentiful housekeeping money that could cover the board of a horse as an incidental item, that there was just one picture on the walls and not one bit of bric-à-brac anywhere. And yet, for all its plainness, it was a very pretty room. Nancy wished that it were different in one respect; tucked in a corner by itself, with only one door and that into the dusky hall, it gave no view of the rest of the mysterious little grey house.

"Maybe you won't be so glad to see me when you hear why I've come," warned Nancy Lee from the depths of a low, many-cushioned wicker chair. "You see I've come to scold you."

In a flash Nancy Lester's welcoming smile died

away, leaving her small face tired and worried. "Oh, dear!" she sighed. "There's so much of that in my life nowadays. 'I can't seem to suit!' That's what Mary Ann is forever saying, if anybody finds the tiniest speck of fault with her. Well, I certainly can't 'seem to suit' anybody at all." She looked at Nancy Lee, caught her discomfited expression, and leaned forward to put a kind hand on her arm. "Please forgive me!" she begged. "I love you so, Nancy dear, that it's a pleasure even to be scolded by you. But Miss Marshall and Miss Dutton and the others have been bothering me such a lot lately about tardiness and irregularity and unpreparedness. As if I wanted to be late and irregular and unprepared! It's just that I simply have to be, and all their complaints have 'got down hard on my nerves,' —that's Mary Ann again."

Nancy Lee stared at her delinquent friend with troubled grey eyes. "Oh, dear!" she broke out finally. "Then your nerves will be completely frazzled—worn out, I mean, before I'm through with you. You see, Nancy Namesake, it's those same things that I've come to see you about—or one of them anyhow—unpreparedness."

Nancy Lester wrinkled her brow. Speedily a light dawned. "Oh, that play!" she cried. "I knew you girls were annoyed with me yesterday.

I felt it in the air. But I was ashamed to say just 'I'm sorry,' and I couldn't very well explain about Mary Ann's grippe and Mother's lace dress that had to be mended for a very special occasion. I don't know those girls well enough to explain things like that to them. But if necessary, Nancy, you can tell them—I mean if they're really angry at me, you know, and unhappy about it."

Nancy laughed. "You comical child! If you'd just told us that you'd been awfully busy and were going to pitch in last night and learn your part by Tuesday rehearsal, we shouldn't have cared a bit. But we were afraid, when you acted so sort of irresponsible and didn't apologize at all, —we were afraid you wouldn't know many more of your lines by Tuesday."

Nancy Lester smiled faintly. "How well you analyze it!" she sighed. "I probably shan't know many more lines by Tuesday. Oh, I want to, Nancy dear! I mean to! But things keep happening to interfere. Oh, I'm glad they chose you to come on the scolding expedition, Nancy Lee, because somehow I don't mind telling you things."

"Thank you!" laughed Nancy. "I think maybe I'd better tell you why I let them choose me for a disagreeable job. It was partly, of course, because you're my namesake and I want to look out for you on that account,—and because I like

you. And then last fall Miss Marshall gave each of us seniors the name of a new girl, to be friendly to at first when things were strange and everybody homesick; and afterward we were to look out for her a little and help her to get into the spirit of the school and to make the best of her opportunities here. Well, I got your name."

"Oh, you were very friendly to me at first!" cried Nancy Lester delightedly. "Isn't it nice of a school—a school mistress, that is,—to encourage friendliness by a plan like that? In my New York school there was nothing of the sort, I assure you. And now, if you're responsible for me in a way to Miss Marshall, I'm still more glad to have you come like this and scold. Because I can't explain to teachers, but surely I can make you see that I'm not late just to be troublesome, and that I'm not unprepared because I'm idle and lazy." Nancy Lester's little figure drooped dejectedly. "I'd like one person to understand," she said sadly. "I do *hate* fusses. I'd rather do what everybody wants, but I can't. There simply isn't enough of me to go round!"

Nancy Lee, trying to answer the plea for understanding of the queer little girl who sat opposite her and at the same time to represent fairly the interests of her constituents, the cast, spoke slowly and thoughtfully. "Why do you start so many

things? My brother Dick is like that. Father is always telling him not to 'bite off more than he can chew.' When you're in school, specially in a fairly expensive private school like Fair Oaks, school duties have to come first and outside things must go. Studying your lessons properly and being on time—doing it all up right—is what you go to school to do. And the play—of course you know as well as I do that it will be spoiled if the cast don't learn their parts. Being letter-perfect is the first step to success, Miss Dutton says, and such a big step that there's no possible way of getting around it."

"Oh, I know that!" sighed Nancy Lester. "I know it almost better than any one. Oh, I hate muffing and fumbling. But you see there's my job—I mean, I can't help seeing things that need to be done, and then I can't let them go. It just doesn't seem right to me to be learning interesting lessons and studying beautiful poetry and all, when somebody is unhappy and I know it and can do something about it, if I take the time. And then of course there's the other part of my jo —— I mean there's always my mother to look after."

"Nancy Lester," began Nancy Lee severely, "I'm trying to understand you, as you want me to, and as Jane says you understand other people. But as Jane told you the day we talked about

Grace's monument, you are *very* poor at explanation. You've said so many things to-day that don't explain at all, and specially one thing that I've often heard you say before. You say it quick, as if it slipped out by mistake, and then you always try to change it. 'That's my job,' you say. 'I mean I keep noticing things.' Something like that. Now if you really want me to understand, please tell me this minute about your 'job.'"

Nancy Lester raised her big serious eyes to Nancy Lee's face. "Why, yes, I'll tell you," she said. "It's nothing specially secret; only my father is dead and I loved him dearly and of course I shouldn't care to tell everybody what he said to me just at the last. We knew it was the last and we were talking things out between us. We always did that, you know, just we two, because my mother is very lovely and tremendously clever but —not—very practical." Nancy Lester chose her words carefully. "And so at the end my father said to me: 'Look after your mother, Nancy. You're only a little girl, but you are the only one I have to trust her to, and I can trust you. Look after your mother, and be kind.' That's what he said, so that's my job, and the older I grow the harder it is, because I see more in it—more to do for Mother and more for the rest. And of course, whatever happens about lessons and school and the

play, I can't give up my job. It wouldn't seem right to me to attend to my own little affairs and let go my job that my darling father gave me to see to. So now I've explained that beautifully, haven't I, Nancy dear?"

Nancy looked sympathetic, but still puzzled. "Ye-es," she said, "you have. And of course I think it's lovely of you to feel as you do. But there's the play——" Nancy had a sudden inspiration. "Don't you think it's being kind to the girls to learn your part? It certainly makes them awfully unhappy when you don't. And just this little while when you're so busy, couldn't your mother——" Nancy paused, trying to put the matter delicately.

"*Be* a mother?" suggested the other Nancy swiftly. "Well, perhaps, though unluckily this happens to be her busy time too. My mother is a portrait painter, you see—quite a famous portrait painter. She's been doing two very distinguished persons lately—oh, well, it doesn't matter about that. But the exhibition where one of her new pictures is hung opened yesterday in New York. So of course she had to have her most becoming gown decently mended up for the occasion—there being no more real Paris gowns to be had in war-time," added Nancy Lester parenthetically. "And when she gets back—oh, I couldn't ask her to do

differently. I couldn't possibly! She never bothers me about children should be seen and not heard, so why should I bother her about being a mother?"

Nancy Lee burst out laughing. "You are too comical for anything, Nancy Namesake. But would you have to out-and-out ask her to be different? Couldn't you just tell her about the play and your star-part and all, and wouldn't she notice how things are—how busy you ——"

"Oh, *no!*" broke in Nancy's namesake swiftly. "She wouldn't. She doesn't notice anything. She is too busy being noticed, I suppose—she's so very lovely and so amusing and such a famous portrait painter. Oh, once in a while she does notice. I told you how I said I wished we had a house, after I'd seen Miss Marshall's bungalow, to put fascinating English chintzes in; so Mother got me one. And I said I wished the horse Captain was mine, so Mother bought him. Once in a while she gets me something like that, that I say in an idle moment I want. The rest of the time she—looks the other way."

Nancy Lee's merry laugh rippled out again. "What a comical mother she must be! But anyhow, Nancy, can't she at least look out for herself for a while? Of course your father meant for you to look after her when she needed it. But a

grown-up lady, who's so dear and charming, can't need very much of you all the time."

"Can't she?" sighed Nancy Lester. "Oh, I assure you you don't know my mother. She comes down to breakfast every morning looking perfectly lovely in an embroidered mandarin coat that her very richest sitter once gave her. She never comes till it's fearfully late and I ought to be starting for my classes. But I have to stop and pour her coffee, because nobody else, not even herself, can get the cream in exactly right. And then she sips her coffee and goes over to the divan under the windows and is very cross because there isn't a new breakfast food to try. But she cheers up if her letters are amusing, or if I ask her please to admire the chintzes that Mr. Bob and I chose for her dining-room. And then she goes off to paint with a blue studio apron over the mandarin coat; and I can go to school. That's the last of my mother till tea-time,—except luncheon-on-a-tray in the studio that Mary Ann simply cannot learn to make dainty enough for the occasion, and luncheon parties, of course, on off-days when she isn't painting. But from tea-time on she's tired and must be amused; and even if there's some one to dinner, it's safer for me to stand by the ship, because a person that my mother gaily asks to dinner by long-distance telephone in the morn-

ing may bore her awfully in the evening of that same day. And when she's bored or tired or lonely, I remember my father and know that I haven't been doing my job up brown," concluded Nancy Lester breathlessly.

Nancy Lee, also breathless with interest, gave a little sigh. "I see. And you couldn't notice so many outside things for a little while? I know you couldn't, for we've talked about that before. And yet—we must have you in the play. Nobody else could do Maire decently, and you're wonderful at it—and it's a long, hard part."

Nancy Lester frowned perplexedly. "But why do you go back to the play?" she queried. "Haven't we settled that?"

Nancy Lee, in her turn, "registered" bewilderment. "I didn't know we had. That's what I specially came for—to make you promise to learn your part and so relieve the girls' minds. And, besides, I wanted to relieve my own mind of the responsibility I had—as your special mentor, Miss Marshall called it,—to see that you did things up right at the school. But the play is the most important just now."

Nancy Lester waved that consideration away swiftly. "Oh, but didn't you say I must learn the part?" she demanded brusquely. "Didn't you say it would be a kindness to the girls? Well,

that's my job, isn't it, to be kind? I can always find time for that, can't I, because it's my job. Let me see—early morning is best for learning poetry by heart. I'll get up at four to-morrow, and Tuesday too, if necessary. Maire Bruin shall be letter-perfect and more at the next rehearsal. And thus everybody shall be happy."

CHAPTER XI

JANE A. A. CONCENTRATES

"WELL, what did you glean about the Lester case?" It was Jane, of course, dangling over the stair-rail, when Nancy arrived home from the "scolding expedition."

Nancy looked up at her, wide-eyed with chagrin and astonishment.

"Why, I never gleaned a thing, Jane," she admitted. "I never even thought of the Lester case. I was so busy trying to make her see that she must learn her ——"

"Well, will she?" demanded Jane.

Nancy nodded. "Yes, she will—because it would make us girls unhappy if she didn't. She can't have that, you know, because her job is to be kind—I mean she tries to, whenever she ——"

"Her job!" Jane cut in again. "She's told you about that, has she? Doesn't it throw any light on the case? I'm bursting to know—I mean I'm extremely curious about that mysterious and never-to-be-mentioned job. Can't you tell me?"

Nancy couldn't. "And it doesn't throw any light, Jane, except that it shows how sweet she is

—and that her father, who's dead, must have been splendid too."

"Well, then, the house," persisted Jane. "Does it seem like a spy's house? And her mother—did you see her?"

Nancy explained about Mrs. Lester. "Maybe you can tell whether or not a little reception-room with wicker chairs and dull yellow hangings and one picture and a bouquet of daffodils looks like spies," she concluded with asperity. "I couldn't. The hall was rather dark, and there were two high-backed carved chairs in it. I hope the next person I see will take a little interest in Maire Bruin's being 'letter-perfect and more' by Tuesday. It wasn't as easy as it sounds, Jane Learned, getting her to see it."

"See what?" demanded Jane obtusely. "Will she surely keep her promise, do you think?"

"Why, that's the whole point of my cleverness," sighed Nancy. "She will—because we're going to be worried and unhappy if she doesn't. We're her kind of case—the sort of persons that she notices, generally at inconvenient moments, and tries to help. This is a particularly busy time for her, because their maid has grippe; but all the same she's bound to attend to us, because that's part of her j —— Oh, please excuse me, Jane, but she'll have to tell you about that job herself."

"Um," muttered Jane gruffly. "Well, there's one thing gained by Mrs. Lester's absence. I'm not obliged to award two prizes to a person who forgot the main issue, which is not, in my humble opinion, the success of the Anti-Slang play but the solving of the Lester mystery; and who, once inside the small grey house, found no ingenious excuse for getting further than a perfectly impersonal yellow reception-room. Why, if I'd been there, I'd have ——"

"Jane Learned," began Nancy suddenly, "have you done anything on your story for the Ten-School Contest?"

Jane started guiltily, blushed, and collected herself sufficiently to smile disdainfully down at Nancy. "Your conversation is as inconsecutive as Kittie Westervelt's thoughts on Ethics," she said coolly. "What has my story to do with your somewhat unprofitable afternoon?"

"Just this," explained Nancy Lee. "You haven't begun your story; you know you haven't. You'd almost forgotten the contest in your excitement over other things. Which proves that you aren't a fit person to lecture me on not keeping my eye on the ball. I was sent to Nancy Lester to-day to make her learn her part. I also felt responsible myself for never having tried to influence her to be prompt and systematic and reliable, as Miss

Marshall wants all her girls to be. I attended to those things, and they took all my time and attention. The Lester mystery—that's even a nicer name than the Lester case, Jane,—will certainly be cleared up in time, and cleared up right. You and I know that, Jane, and I hope we're about the only ones, except Kittie and Mildred, who know anything at all about that horrid blue letter." By this time Nancy had climbed more than half-way up to Jane and Jane had come down to meet her; so that the two were sitting cozily side by side on the stair, and their voices could be properly confidential in tone.

"The horrid blue letter," announced Jane oratorically, "is famous, I assure you. You've forgotten Phyllis—Phyllis and her innocent tool, the well-meaning but excitable Christina. Everybody in this school knows about the Lester case, N. Lee. They don't talk to you about it, because they know you're a partisan; they don't talk much to me. But this school is buzzing with rumors. Didn't you detect a note of real bitterness in the discussion about Nancy Namesake's ignoring of her responsibilities to the school play?"

Nancy considered. "They did jump rather extra hard. Was that because of the spy talk? Oh, Jane, isn't it a shame? Can't you talk some sense into Christina?"

Jane shook her head till her back hair wobbled dangerously. Then she stood up. "We've got to protect the honor of the school by not giving Phyllis away," she said stiffly, "and I've got to write that story—also for the honor of the school. Let me see—what's to-day? The eighteenth? Then I've a week and a day—loads of time. But I'd better go and write home now and otherwise clear the decks to-day for action to-morrow."

Safe in her room with the door closed, Jane dug out the handsome leather-bound note-book devoted to "Plots" from its hiding-place in the depths of her desk, and stared at it long and disconsolately.

"Great hat!" she ejaculated at last. "Great bonnet! I haven't a plot in mind—nor a start for one. I'd completely, entirely, and finally forgotten the Ten-School Story Contest that I've got to win. N. Lee, you little know how hard you hit me! No 'ifs,' Jane A. A., no excuses, no failures. You've got to write that story, for the honor of Fair Oaks, that has been stabbed in the dark but shall not be beaten by a lie—bluff—lie. Go to it, Jane A. A., and make good!"

It is easy, on a Sunday evening devoted to letters home and to "clearing the decks for action," to say to yourself, "Make good." But on Monday morning, with the consciousness heavy upon you that art is long and time is fleeting—five out of six

weeks having flown by on wings,—on a blue Monday morning, with a February rain beating on the windows, it is not so easy to sit down and deliver the goods. As a matter of fact it was afternoon before Jane had time to sit down seriously to her literary labors. She began the minute afternoon study-hour spread its mantle of silence and concentration over the Senior House. She had plenty of work to prepare for the next day, but she boldly relegated it to evening, when she should be less fresh for her great enterprise.

"If I can't learn to-morrow's lessons," she reflected, "I can flunk on my reputation—or bluff on it." Jane shrugged angrily. It was a bluff—to name it politely—that had got her into her present uncomfortably strenuous position. "Well, I can flunk," Jane revised, "and anyhow I can do a lot to-night if I concentrate properly. Lloyd always has study-time left over for reading. Wish I'd learned how to dig and grind in my youth—my wasted, joyous youth of the many boarding schools and the scrapes continuous."

Jane lay back comfortably against her pile of couch pillows, which she had arranged on the theory that physical relaxation promotes mental activity, and dreamed over those gay, careless days, when she and Christina were inseparable, invincible, the terror of every teacher and every

school they encountered. For ten minutes Jane grinned to herself as she thought it all over. Ten minutes brought her to Fair Oaks; to Rat Day, to the jelly roll that fell on the stairs, to the disciplining of Kittie Westervelt, and the training down of Plain Mary into the sylph-like proportions that her guardian admired. That hadn't been exactly a scrape, but Mary had been so absurdly and deliciously scared of being nicknamed "Fatty."

Jane sat up with a start. Half an hour gone and no results, not even a profitable thought, to show for it. She opened the impressive note-book to the page dedicated to the unfolding of Plot I, and held her pencil poised, ready for use. Nothing came. Jane bit the pencil. No results. She stared frowningly at the opposite wall. All she saw was a spot where Vera Lawson had splashed hair tonic and made matters worse with a stain-remover. Vera Lawson—she was a sort of story-book heroine. But everybody would recognize her. It would be better to take a girl who wasn't so well known. Every girl, every person has a story; it would be better to take somebody at home. Then, when the winning story was read in Assembly, nobody would know who was meant.

That set Jane dreaming again; of the crowded assembly hall, buzzing with pride and satisfaction

because Fair Oaks had won the Story Contest; of Miss Marshall's comradely smile at the talented young author; of Phyllis Knight's stare, no longer scornful; of little Christina's face, rapt with admiration of her tall twin, who could write.

"Well, I can," thought Jane angrily, "when I get started—when I'm in the mood. I have done things just as good as that horrid tale that I'm mixed up with." Jane disentangled herself from the cushions and stalked over to her desk, where she opened a drawer full of manuscripts and selected several for perusal. Ensconced in her desk chair, a more businesslike seat than the couch, she began to look over her old stories. One by one she glanced at the titles, read a little, smiled a little sometimes, and tossed each effort back into the drawer. They were no good! There were clever spots, to be sure, that had amused Jane when she wrote them and given her a reputation for great wit among the girls. Jane had laughed in her sleeve at that, because most of the clever bits were sayings of little Christina, polished up a bit and given a good setting; and the very girls to whom Christina had made the original remarks never recognized them. Christina was never accused of cleverness; she was universally considered just interestingly stupid.

Off the track again—hopelessly off! Jane

pulled herself up with a jerk of complete exasperation. If there was one thing that was more sure than another to paralyze her brain-processes and make the production of a prize-winning story a difficult and lengthy and toilsome process, it was remembering about Christina's part in the stories already written. Jane, even the new Jane A. A., detested doing things that went slowly and toilsomely. She liked slap-dash methods and she succeeded best with them.

After two hours divided between spurts of concentration on Plot I, and equally absorbed intervals of idle dreaming, Jane snapped the impressive note-book shut, set her lips in a thin, determined line, and devoted her attention to a History review, with results which satisfied even Jane's speed-loving soul. Then, trying to look and to feel gay, she went off by appointment to join a party of skaters, hoping that all the girls but Nancy Lee would be as oblivious to the imminence of the Short Story Contest as she had been before Nancy's timely reminder. Alas for Jane's hopes!

"Got it done, Jane?" cried Kittie Westervelt, when Jane appeared.

"Try it out on the dog to-night, Jane. Meaning me."

"I'll copy it for you, Jane"—this from Lloyd of the copper-plate hand.

"No fair stealing a march like that," remonstrated one of the Mabels, who was the proud possessor of a miniature typewriter. "I'll type it. If it takes me hours and hours, Jane, I'll do it without a single mistake. And the rest can sit around reading it and criticizing my spelling as I work."

"For all your kind words and offers I thank you," said Jane airily, buckling on a skate. "I can't but resent the implied slam—criticism of my perfectly good handwriting. However, it's all for the honor of Fair Oaks. When I've put on the final polish I'll call a meeting of the Short Story Class that elected me to this job, and Mabel and Lloyd can present their rival claims for adjustment. Any one preferring a really literary, really artistic scrawl like mine can vote accordingly."

"Are you 'really literary,' Jane Learned?" It was Phyllis Knight's low drawling voice, tossing the question into Jane's private ear, as Phyllis glided by, a whir of gold and white, racing up the pond. There was no time for an answer, but Jane flushed, red-hot with rage at the thought that Phyllis had scored again. There *was* no answer to her remark.

In the evening Jane tried a new set of tactics. Putting the "Plots" note-book where she could get it in a hurry, she set to work on to-morrow's lessons. Her plan was to concentrate her unman-

ageable mind on one thing and expect it to wander off, as it had in the afternoon, and dream of something else,—namely, Plots. But now Jane's perverse mind stuck tight to Math and Ethics; it ran off once or twice very briefly, but never in the right direction, never to Plots or the materials of Plots. To be sure, after Jane had gone to bed, her mind dreamed of Plots; they looked like ugly, skinny, stooped old gnomes. Jane tried madly to catch a gnome, though she disliked their looks extremely, but each time, as her hand was ready to close on one, he danced out of reach, grinning derisively at her. Naturally on Tuesday morning Jane felt tired and cross and very, very uninspired, and on Tuesday afternoon, after having answered dozens, if not hundreds of questions about the final polish she was putting on her story before it could be copied, she felt even worse.

By evening she bristled outside like a porcupine; and within she was as limp as a wet dish-mop. The minute the gong for the end of evening-study hour was rung, Jane dashed to the stair-rail and called, "N. Lee, come up here this minute!"

"Why can't you come down for a change?" demanded Nancy, strolling leisurely out into the hall. Jane's porcupine manners at the rehearsal of "The Land of Heart's Desire" that afternoon had exasperated even good-natured Nancy.

"Something special," Jane called down to Nancy. That was a sort of private password between them, meaning, in plain language, "I want to talk secrets." Lately it had been used chiefly about the Lester case.

"Oh, all right," said Nancy, reluctantly obliged to admit the superiority of Jane's up-stairs room for a secret conference.

As she mounted the stairs she added, for the benefit of chance listeners, "I think it's high time you wanted to see me about one thing, Jane Learned. Every one of the Bruin family but you has congratulated me twice over on the success of my scolding expedition, and you haven't said a word."

"Oh, yes." Jane came out of her absorption hurriedly. "You did beautifully at that, I'm sure. But what are empty compliments between friends?" She lowered her voice. "I've got something on my mind, N. Lee, something that matters."

"About the Lester case?" demanded Nancy eagerly, shutting the door of Jane's single against possible intruders.

"No," said Jane dejectedly. "The Lester case doesn't matter vitally, because it's bound to straighten out in time, as you've said yourself. N. Lee, I haven't written a word of that contest

story! I'd forgotten about it, with all the other excitements there were going, until you mentioned it the other day. Since then I've tried, but I can't do a thing. I'm scared almost to pieces, N. Lee. I just had to tell somebody."

"You didn't think I could help, did you?" said Nancy Lee slowly, trying hard not to show Jane how disappointed and frightened and despairing she felt. Nancy Lee was as slow and plodding a worker as Jane was swift and brilliant. Furthermore she regarded "writing" as some sort of magic process that you could no more learn by practice than you could learn to fly without a substitute for wings. Also, Nancy, if careless, was generally forehanded; if she had promised to do something, she did it right away, not so much from a sense of duty as because she wanted to get it off her mind. Jane's predicament, with less than a week in which to produce a story worthy of Fair Oaks and the Short Story Class, seemed to her perfectly hopeless, and disgraceful besides. For once Jane A. A., whom Nancy had been extremely proud of, had failed to come up to expectations.

Now Nancy was not an adept at hiding her feelings, and Jane's hurt look showed her plainly that she had failed to do so now.

"No," said Jane quietly, "I don't think you can help me. Nobody can, much; I'm Jane A. A. for

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sure in this thing. The story I submit must be my own honest work. I—I just thought I'd tell you."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Nancy forlornly. "I wish you hadn't, because I'm worried stiff, Jane, and as I've said and you've said, I can't help one bit. Oh, I wish I could! Why, a week—less than a week—is just no time at all."

"Nonsense!" sniffed Jane, spurred up by Nancy's final statement. "A week is long enough to write dozens of stories. All I need is a good start. I thought maybe you'd have some little idea—funny story or anecdote or something—that would give me a push, and then I'd be off. If you haven't, never mind. And for hat's sake, don't worry! It's not your funeral."

"You said that exactly like Phyllis Knight," announced Nancy stiffly. "I'm sure I wish I could give you a start, Jane, but that's just the very part of writing that I never can do myself. So I don't think you need be cross with me."

Jane patted her friend's shoulder repentantly. "I'm not cross, N. Lee; I'm just—agitated. Tomorrow things will look up. We'll both keep our ears open for the right kind of silly tale that will push me off. And we'll find it between us; sure thing we will."

"All right. I'll look hard," Nancy promised

eagerly. "And I'll begin this minute. Good-bye, Jane." And Nancy tore off down-stairs where she amazed the group of seniors who were encamped in her room, waiting to consult with her about Mildred Wallace's Faery Child costume, by announcing, "I can't put my mind on fairy clothes till you've each told me the best funny story you know. I've promised to collect some. Oh, please don't make me waste time on explanations. You begin, Kittie."

But next morning, when Nancy presented Jane with what she secretly considered a very promising collection of "starters," the would-be authoress was not even grateful.

"Oh, Nancy Lee, at times you don't understand *anything* at all!" she exclaimed ungraciously.

Nancy sighed. "I tried, Jane; I tried hard. If it's a case for understanding, why don't you go to Nancy Lester? I don't believe she can write a bit better than I can, but maybe she can understand what you want for your 'starter.' You've said yourself that she understands what people mean, and that's why they tell her things."

"I shan't tell her this," snapped Jane. "She'd understand all too well that from the start I've acted like a conceited idiot."

"She'd certainly try to help you out, Jane," said Nancy sadly. "But then I did that."

"You did, N. Lee." Jane A. A., who prided herself on her sense of proportion, came suddenly to the fore. "And I thank you a lot. But I guess this is a thing that I can't be helped at all about. I've got to help myself or—be licked and give Phyllis Knight another chance at me. I say, N. Lee, you'd better skip to Assembly or you'll get a tardy mark. I'll come in a second. Being longer-legged, I can sprint faster."

Nancy took the hint and departed, feeling that the burden of the world was weighing down her young shoulders. Nobody could help Jane, and she apparently couldn't make good herself; therefore Fair Oaks would lose the Short Story Contest, and poor Jane A. A., who had become a petted school idol and loved it, would fall from her tall pedestal with a crash. Nancy "flunked dead" three times in the course of the morning, which was exactly the number of times she was called upon to recite.

As for Jane, she made three excellent recitations and "volunteered" successfully in History. She returned flippant answers to all questions about her story; but to-day there were not many questions. Nancy Lee's industrious and unexplained pursuit of anecdotes had aroused suspicions, and this morning Nancy's long face and Jane's over-affable manner confirmed them. The school,

especially the Short Story Class, began to worry about Jane. When she cut dessert at luncheon, cut her favorite orange ice on the plea that she had a headache, suspicions became certainty. The school buzzed with imaginary versions of Jane's plight.

Meanwhile Jane sat at her desk, staring into vacancy and thinking things out. She was really thinking now, not idly dreaming. The last minute, she felt, had now arrived. Last minutes always inspired Jane. Now, though she felt herself defeated, she meant to fight the losing fight to a finish. Jane A. A.'s hard-won reputation was not to be sacrificed without a struggle worthy of the cause.

"What's the matter with me?" meditated Jane. "I'm perfectly well. I never could study any faster than now. I can write beautiful expositions. I've tried hard enough on this story since I got started—too hard, I suppose. But you have to hustle if you wait till the last minute, as I always do. All this year I've never written any nice little stories such as I used to toss off just for fun. I've sort of—stuck to facts. I haven't thought much about people—they haven't entertained me. Nancy Lee's been a good pal, and I've liked to get the girls crazy about Jane A. A., but that's all. I wonder why I've changed so. People

used to amuse me tremendously. Can't see why they don't now. If they did I could pick some out and write that story. I don't understand it!" Jane's thoughts paused there.

"If I understood, which I don't, maybe I could do something about it," she concluded finally—a hopeless conclusion seemingly, but in reality it was most hopeful, for it made her think of Nancy Lester,—Noticing Nancy, the girl who always understood other people's dilemmas and so won their confidences.

"Wonder what she'd say," mused Jane. "Wonder how she manages to figure out so many things about other people's business and everlastingly get 'em right. I might tell her. Great hat, why should I worry that poor little overworked kid? I've worried N. Lee into a regular funk. The whole school's worried—except Noticing Nancy, of course, who is Nancy A. A. to the extent of never hearing any school gossip. As far as I'm concerned, I'd like to tell her. She'd coöperate like mad; I know she would. But how could she help me? How? How? How?"

There once more Jane's thoughts halted uncertainly, and for the first time wandered off to an apparently irrelevant issue: namely, the way Noticing Nancy Lester hunted out unhappy people and cheered them up, just as if doing that was her

particular business in life. Jane didn't know, of course, as Nancy Lee did, that it *was* her business —her "job." She hadn't heard the whole story, as Nancy Lee had. She could only speculate, imagine, how it would seem to do as Noticing Nancy did.

"She must have loads of friends," Jane meditated. "Loads of friends and not an enemy in the world. She's interested in people, even more than I used to be. She must have piles of stories in her head, comical ones and sad ones." Jane thought about that a minute. Then she sat up straight suddenly, and her face and figure took on a new alertness.

"Trouble with my head is, it's full of *one* story —one person. And it's not a—kind story. Kindness opens your life and makes it bigger. Quarrels and resentments shut it up. I hate Phyllis and I'm angry with Christina. I'm her twin but I won't let it matter. I've been proud to be Jane A. A.—to shut Christina out. Well, what I've really done is to shut myself in. I'm not really living in the big world nowadays. I'm in a little shut-in world of my own. So I have nothing to write about. There! That's explained. But what earthly use to me is the explanation?" Jane slumped back in her chair with a dreary look on her face and a forlorn droop to her shoulders.

For five minutes perhaps she sat like that. Then she straightened wearily, reached for a book, and began to study. For ten minutes more she kept up the pretense of concentrated absorption in the events of the reign of Victoria. But the resounding bang she hit the desk with her fist and the beaming grin that spread over her face, at the end of those ten minutes, seemed hardly explicable as a result of her Victorian studies; they were certainly highly unbecoming manners for a lady of the Victorian era.

It was still only the middle of afternoon study-hour, but Jane pushed back her chair unconcernedly, tossing the history book on the couch because the pile of debris on the desk had already reached alarming proportions, walked coolly down two flights of stairs, gave the "twin rap-tap" on Christina's door, and went in without waiting to be asked. Accordingly she was in time to hear a book fall, and to see a rustle of skirts disappearing closet-ward. Little Christina, curled up on the couch, stared at her in wide-eyed amazement.

Jane smiled at her twin, a rather stiff-lipped smile, but the best she could muster. "Hail, gentle Christina!" she began in her old jovial fashion. "I'm in a fix and I've come to you to get me out—being only half a person myself alone, as we've always said of us twins." She glanced at

the half-closed closet door inquiringly, and then at Christina, who only looked distressed and said, "Oh, Jane!" exactly as she always used to do when a situation was too complicated for her.

Jane shrugged, straightened, and addressed the closet-door. "Come on out, Phyllis," she invited pleasantly. "I hate to talk into the dark."

"You also hate to talk to me, I fancy." Phyllis Knight, cool and complacent, emerged from her hiding-place. "Well, you needn't. I was just going anyway, and after the noise you made on the stairs I think it's wiser for me to hurry, and thus avoid a possible visit from our dear house teacher. Good-bye, Christie."

"Good-bye." Christina's eyes raised to Phyllis were less adoring than distressed.

But Jane was grinning jovially. "I never thought that I, the cautious, scrape-avoiding twin, would have you on the run, Phyllis," she said, not in a challenging way, but in the friendly tone she would have used to Nancy Lee or Lloyd Mallory.

For once Phyllis Knight had no retort ready; with a mumbled remark about—"just going anyway," she departed, and the twins were alone together for the first time in months.

"Oh, *Jane!*" cried little Christina again. "Is it something awful?"

"No," denied Jane indignantly. "It's just

rather a mess—nothing to scare you so, dearie. It's that story." Briefly Jane confided her predicament and waited for Christina to play her part.

And now, having had the situation cleared up for her by Jane, little Christina found it neither bewildering nor distressing, only perfectly simple and characteristic of the other twin—queer, clever, irresponsible, last-minute Jane.

"I don't call that a mess, Jane," she announced, after she had wrinkled her pretty brow for a moment over the tale of Jane's anxieties. "It's exactly the way you always were—are," substituted Christina tactfully. "I don't see what ever possessed you to think of writing the story day before yesterday, or yesterday even. You never could, don't you remember? Maybe to-night—or to-morrow—you'll have an idea. You can have my purple rug to blanket your window with, while you sit up to copy it; but please, Jane, don't put my rug on the floor. And you can take my ink; yours is sure to be thick. Isn't it great that they chose you, Jane, because of course you'll win and then everybody in this school will just be crazy with joy."

"Do you honestly think I can win, Christina?" demanded Jane, in a voice that shook with eagerness in spite of her effort to sound casual.

"Why, of course I do, Jane," said little Chris-

tina simply. "We—haven't stuck together much lately, but I guess, just because you and Phyllis didn't get on, I haven't forgotten how clever and how perfectly splendid you are. Jane,"—little Christina leaned over to put her clinging arms around the tall twin,—"you never asked me to choose between you and Phyllis, but I do choose now. I choose you!"

"Thanks a lot, dearie," said Jane huskily, "but you don't have to choose me. You've got me, and you can have Phyllis too. Who am I that I should pick out friends for the gentle Christina? I say, Christina, hang out a busy sign for us, will you? I've simply got to write that story."

"All right," agreed Christina obediently. "I'll study my trig some more. I haven't had a chance to do anything on it yet, between the two of you talking to me."

So Christina curled up on the couch again with her trigonometry. Jane sat at Christina's desk and, because Christina's best note paper was the first she happened upon, it was on that that she hastily scribbled down the story called "Coöperation." It was the tale of Captain, Nancy Lester's horse, with Captain and the Italians to the fore and Mrs. Lester and the girls in the background. It was comical one minute and teary the next, and Jane, as she wrote, chuckled and looked stern

alternately. And on the couch little Christina fumbled at trig a little, watched Jane a great deal, talked to her gaily whenever her pen stopped, and stopped talking when said pen began to waver impatiently over the paper. Christina talked of everything, and Jane listened with one part of her mind while the other part was busy recalling remarks that Christina had made in the old days. There was, in the final draft of the story, which was completed twenty minutes after Christina had slipped out to bribe the Senior House maid not to ring the dinner-gong, a very great deal of Christina.

"Making a spectacle of me!" grumbled Jane, when dinner for two on a tray appeared at the psychological moment of the story's completion.

"The spectacle will be when your story wins the prize," returned Christina calmly, tasting her soup. "The school was pretty worried, and now they'll all be just tickled pink to know you've finished."

Jane stretched and grinned. "All right. Tell N. Lee first, though. I've bothered her fearfully. Then after study-hour get Typewriter Mabel and Lloyd Mallory down here and we'll arrange about copying. You can study in my room if you want to. I'm going to sleep." As she snuggled down among Christina's soft pillows, with Christina's

treasured purple rug over her, Jane blinked sleepily up at her twin. "It was you pulled me through, dearie—you and Noticing Nancy Lester's philosophy of life."

Christina looked blank.

"Don't bother your little head trying to figure that out, twinnie," smiled Jane. "I don't believe Noticing Nancy herself would understand. But the point is, she helped me out, and now I've got to help her. To-morrow the Twins and the Triangle will get busy on the Lester mystery. Don't know about it? Of course you don't. But you'll know all about it to-morrow, and maybe more too, because now we're back being twins."

CHAPTER XII

NO TIME TO BE HEROINE

It was the great day of the Anti-Slang Society's official celebration. The play, "The Land of Heart's Desire," had been rehearsed, staged, and costumed to a finish; the Reception Committee was ready to receive the audience, and to refresh them after the play with the daintiest of collations. Everybody was pleasantly excited, except the cast, and they were calm with the calmness of despair.

"A bad dress rehearsal always means a good performance," Miss Dutton had tried to reassure them with the familiar stage tradition. "I've seen it work out that way dozens of times."

Miss Dutton watched their unbelieving faces and chuckled inwardly. Perhaps the reason the rule worked, she thought, was because casts, even veteran actors, never believe that it will; and the fear of failure puts them on their mettle.

"We can only do our best," said Mildred Wallace sadly. She had been perhaps the worst at the fatal last rehearsal.

"But it must be good enough to 'get across,'"

declared Jane Learned savagely. "It just must be!"

"It will be," put in optimistic Nancy Lee. "Didn't Miss Dutton say so?"

"I've noticed," began Nancy Lester, smiling faintly around the circle of troubled young faces, "that the bad things you expect are not the ones that happen. We are all worried about repeating the mistakes we've made to-night. Well, they won't be repeated. Others may be made, but"—suddenly Nancy's little face rippled with real mirth—"haven't you noticed that in amateur plays the mistakes are often the best part? There was a play last winter in my mother's studio—they wrote it themselves one evening and acted it the next. It was rather a stupid play, I thought, though they were none of them stupid people; but the mistakes were beautiful —— Oh, I couldn't tell you now all the deliciously comical things that happened—but the audience certainly did enjoy itself."

"Let's cheer up then," said Jane, hugging Maire Bruin-Lester. "Let's cheer up and do our best and 'put it over,' mistakes and all, for the honor of Fair Oaks and the Anti-Slang Society. And one thing we may be sure of. I don't know whether Noticing Nancy has noticed it or not, but Maire Bruin-Lester won't make a single mistake.

She couldn't, if she tried. That's one thing in our favor."

Perhaps it was because she remembered that appreciative speech of Jane's and hoped that Jane's extravagant confidence in Maire Bruin would make her tolerant in the face of an apparent betrayal of that confidence, that Nancy Lester chose Jane to telephone to after luncheon on the day of the play's production.

"Oh, Jane, please don't be unhappy about it," Nancy Lester began eagerly, "but I can't come to-night. I can't possibly! Miss Dutton can read my part, the way she did the day I had a headache. You said it was beautiful. So all will go well, and I *am* sorry, and please, please don't be unhappy."

"Say it all over, Noticing Nancy," commanded Jane, "and tell me the reason. Is—has——" Jane's frightened voice died away to a murmur, in which "death in the family" and "this dreadful war" were the distinguishable phrases. If she had heard aright, Nancy Lester was not going to act in the play; nothing but disaster of the first magnitude could account for that.

"I said," repeated Nancy Lester patiently, "that I cannot possibly come to-night to act in the play. Yes, it's the war, partly, Jane. They are all going to France,—Mother's men friends in New York, I

mean,—to drive motors or fight in the trenches or start hospitals or get food to the Belgians, and they all come up, before they sail, for a good-bye dinner. You can't refuse them that, you see, when they may never come back from 'somewhere in France.' There are six here to-day, and Mary Ann cannot lift her head from her pillow. The doctor wanted her to be sent to a hospital, but the poor thing is dreadfully scared of hospitals, so I—we got her a nurse. The nurse is young and pretty, and the kitchen-table is this minute piled with her dishes and other things she has dropped there. So I've got that to clear away first, and then dinner for seven in the dining-room, and food for the three of us besides."

"But what time is dinner?" demanded Jane swiftly. "You can just leave the dishes, you know, and you'll be in time ——"

"Dinner is at eight," returned Nancy Lester calmly, "and they won't hurry, either about beginning or getting through. That isn't their way. I *am* sorry, Jane! Please tell dear Nancy so, and the rest. I wanted—I loved ——" It was Nancy Lester's voice that broke now, and then, after a tiny pause, lilted out bravely, "Nobody must be unhappy, Jane, and the play will go off splendidly. I know it will! And now I must fly to my kitchen."

A receiver clicked, and Jane, replacing hers with meticulous care, sank into the nearest chair. Of all preposterous, unbelievable—Miss Dutton was the one to be told first—or should it be Nancy Lee?

Could any one learn the part now—any one who looked it? Miss Dutton knew the lines probably, but she was much too tall for the costume. Of all irresponsible, absurd, unpardonable performances, this last-minute excuse of Nancy Lester's was the worst. To stay away from the play that you were starring in, to get dinner for your mother and six men and a sick maid and her nurse —— Nancy Lee was the one to tell first; the dinner was the crux of the situation, and Nancy surely knew more about dinners than Miss Dutton. Jane rushed to the house-monitor for an "emergency permit" to go to Nancy's room, for it was still study-hour, fairly flew back up the stairs, and then, suddenly calm and collected as befitted Jane A. A., set forth Nancy Lester's amazing announcement.

"I've come to you instead of to Miss Dutton," she concluded, "because I thought you'd know more about dinners. You kept house last summer. Isn't there some way of managing a dinner so it will manage itself toward the end? From seven to eight, say, it must manage alone. If

Noticing Nancy could leave her dinner at seven, and it would be ready to eat at eight ——"

In spite of the gravity of the situation Nancy Lee laughed. "You evidently never got a whole dinner by yourself, Jane. 'The last minute for mine' is your favorite motto. Well, it's a dinner's motto. Just before it's to be eaten is the time when things are really strenuous. But—oh, it's no use at all expecting Nancy to dump this dinner where it belongs—on her mother. She and I argued that point all out on the scolding expedition. But why in the world can't they eat earlier? Are they there now?"

Jane thought they must be. She had heard the clamor of gay masculine voices and deep-toned laughter vaguely through the telephone.

"Then they ought to eat earlier," decreed Nancy Lee. "They must. But if they do—we'd better call her up, Jane, and see if she can get it ready earlier. If not ——"

"Don't cross that bridge till you come to it," broke in Jane hastily. "Hurry and let's telephone."

"Oh, Nancy dear, I can't!" came back Nancy Lester's plaintively appealing voice over the telephone. "Oh, I can't possibly! It's not only the dinner—the food. It's the favors. Monsieur Capel made them, but they're all to be wrapped up in a

certain way and labeled. And there are the flowers, and the dining-room to sweep, and the silver coffee-urn to clean. Won't they help me? Why, yes, if I ask them, but how much help could I expect from six men, who are sailing for 'somewhere in France' to-morrow, and my mother, who has worked too hard this morning on the portrait of a rich but stupid lady from Pittsburgh and is now good for nothing but to be amused. I'd much better manage it all alone. Oh, please don't misunderstand, Nancy darling. I am sorry, but I can't do differently, and I haven't an instant to spare. So good-bye."

Nancy turned to Jane, who was standing at her elbow. "Could you hear? What can we do?"

Jane shrugged. "I heard enough. Tell Miss Dutton, I suppose, and —— She'll never read that part, Nancy."

"And if she does ——" began Nancy. The end of study-hour, four o'clock, clanged through the hall, and Lloyd Mallory hurried out of her room, intent, evidently, on some urgent errand.

"Lloyd, listen!" chanted the two consultants in unison; and Lloyd obediently listened.

"But why can't we all go and help her get dinner?" she demanded then, in her placid, Far-Western drawl. "In my country, when a woman has

a parcel of men-folk drop down on her to cook for, the neighbors turn to and help—if they have to go ten miles and more to do it. If we help, she can get ready earlier, and if they can't 'do their own shovin',' as we say in my country, some girls who aren't in the play can stay and be waitresses. They'd be through in time to see the play all right."

"Lloyd Mallory," cried Jane admiringly, "you're a wonder. I'm all for your country. Come and stand by me while I explain to Miss Marshall. Nancy, you be collecting the waitresses. You and Lloyd will be best for cook's assistants, and I'll sweep and clean silver and fix up favors. This is going to be coöperation with a capital."

"Wait a second, Jane," demurred Nancy Lee. "Who's going to tell Nancy Lester that we're coming?"

"We don't do that in my country," said Lloyd. "We just come."

"Hurray for your country again!" cried Jane. "We'll just come—come and get dinner for them all *à la* the Western Slope. Be ready to start in five minutes, Nancy. And don't you worry. I'll explain when we get there, if you'd rather not."

But it was Mrs. Lester, and not Noticing Nancy, who answered the door—Mrs. Lester in a dull green, gold-trimmed dress that hung straight from

her slim shoulders to the floor, with a barbaric gold chain twisted around her dark hair.

"Oh!" she laughed when she saw the girls, patting the chain deprecatingly. "You must excuse this play-acting costume. I thought it was surely Monsieur Capel who knocked. You wanted Annetta? She's informed me twice already this afternoon that she's very busy, but I'll tell her that Miss ——"

"Jane Learned, Lloyd Mallory, and Nancy Lee," supplied Nancy Lee helpfully.

"Thank you, my dear. I shall remember the Jane, Lloyd, and Nancy part anyhow. Oh, what a bad parlor-maid I make! Please come in."

In the hall she waved them into the isolated yellow reception-room and left them. From somewhere further back a ripple of merry conversation broke into a roar of welcome when she appeared.

"Perfect! Perfect!" boomed a deep voice.

"Clothilde the Magnificent!"

The front door opened and a tall gentleman hurried, unannounced, down the hall.

"*Magnifique, magnifique—c'est le mot juste!*" he shouted louder than the rest.

"Hi, hi, Capel? Did you get it?" cried a boyish voice.

"*Ça y est!*" returned Monsieur Capel, with a great rustling of paper wrappings.

And then the tumult of laughter, cheering, shouting, again surpassed itself, growing to uproarious proportions.

"Sh, boys, behave yourselves." It was Nancy's mother. "You'll shock Annetta's little friends. Now be good and quiet while I go and tell her they're here."

"Why can't we have 'em out here to help tie the ribbons?" It was the boyish voice again.

A murmured answer from Mrs. Lester; then decorous, low-toned conversation. The girls in the yellow reception-room sat on the edge of their chairs and did not even exchange smiles. The Lester family's arrangements were certainly very queer—and from a distance, anyhow, very entertaining. No wonder Nancy Lester hurried home from school, if things were often like this, Jane reflected.

"They sound awfully jolly and hungry and hard to hurry," thought Nancy Lee.

But Lloyd, after the first few minutes, sat comfortably back in her chair, and her face relaxed into her rare smile. There was something about all the noise and jollity and the evident informality of the household that reminded her of home. These people, she felt sure, would like their dinner *à la* Western Slope.

"I *am* sorry about my hair and all the noise."

Mrs. Lester back from her errand was smiling down at them. "Annetta won't come in. 'Tell them it isn't any use,' she said. I haven't, of course, the faintest notion what she means; but then, I seldom understand my daughter. Will you come again some day, when the place isn't quite so—crowded?"

Jane looked at Nancy Lee and then at Mrs. Lester. "Oh, thank you," she began. "We should like——" and came to a dead stop.

"We're sorry, but——" Nancy Lee paused also, as she met the quizzical smile on Mrs. Lester's face. It was such a bored, tolerant smile, so hard to talk to. "Run along now, children, and let me go back to my gay friends," it said, as plainly as words.

And then Lloyd Mallory took the situation in hand. "We're not company-callers, to-day, Mrs. Lester," she began quietly. "We've come to help. You see, there's the school play to-night, that Nancy Lester has the principal part in. It begins at eight. Of course you forgot it when you planned your dinner-party. Well, we've come to help Nancy Lester get dinner. In that way it can be ready earlier, and she can be ready in time for the play. So, if we could just take our things off, and go out in the kitchen, and begin to——"

But now the look on Mrs. Lester's face kindled

a doubt even in Lloyd's new-born sense of kinship with this strange household, and she stopped dead, as the other girls had done. Not that Mrs. Lester looked cross; her lovely face under the barbaric gold ornaments was simply a study in astonishment, incredulity, amazed amusement.

"Oh, my dear, how absurd!" she gasped, out of her smothered laughter. Then seeing Lloyd's distressed blush, she put her hand on the girl's arm in comradely fashion. "I don't mean that it isn't dear of you all to offer to help," she went on quickly, "but you don't understand. You couldn't get dinner for us! I couldn't! Annetta is a marvel, you see, about planning, and Mary Ann's cooking is a marvel; so between them the dinner is always a marvel." She smiled brilliantly around the circle. "Come out and see my party," she ordered briskly, "and then you'll understand. Or if you don't understand, you'll certainly be beautifully amused."

Taking Lloyd's arm, she led the way down the dimly lighted hall, with its vague background of rich old carving, to the big room behind. This was a duller yellow room than the little one they had left—buffy brown rather, very big, very simple, very gay with its bird-and-flower patterned chintz hangings and cushions. At a big table strewn with paper wrappings, strings, ribbons, and odd-

shaped parcels, sat two men, who looked up welcomingly, when Mrs. Lester and her charges appeared. In the window lounged another man, grey-haired, distinguished, monocled, playing absorbedly with a toy, a tin monkey that climbed a stick. He did not even notice the newcomers. On the floor sat two other men, one of them very fat. He was painting gaudily on a huge sheet of cardboard, while his comrade held a paint-box and palette and looked on. The sixth man—Nancy Lester had mentioned six—was just coming back by another door.

"Annetta says we can't do that," he announced loudly. "She says she'll clean up after Rugo's poster, but she'll be——" Suddenly his eyes caught Mrs. Lester's, and lighted on the girls behind her. "I beg your pardon," he began. "I didn't know—— Present me please, Shirley." He was the boy who had suggested that Annetta's friends should come and help tie ribbons. And he was almost as handsome as Mr. Bob, who had so excited the imaginations of Fair Oaks in the early fall.

With some helpful assistance from Nancy Lee, Mrs. Lester achieved all the necessary introductions.

"Dickon, go tell Annetta to come here this minute," she ordered. "Tell her I need her."

There was an appealing note in Mrs. Lester's voice as she said "I need her" that made all three Fair Oaks girls suddenly realize another reason why Nancy Lester always hurried home. It was surely wonderful to be needed by somebody who could thrill you like that with her voice, and also look as beautiful as Mrs. Lester did while she thrilled you.

The distinguished man in the window got up and walked gravely over to Jane. "See my monkey. Is it not that he is *charmant?* I cannot bear but that I shall play with him all the afternoon, *comme des enfants!*"

"Hang it, Capel," boomed out the fat artist. "Come and paint me a fairy. Annetta wanted a fairy. They ain't my long suit."

The other man on the floor rose up suddenly. He was as tall and lank as his friend was fat. "You can't have everybody working on that poster, Rugo," he announced aggrievedly. "If you prefer Capel's assistance to mine, take it. I shall then confiscate the monkey and devote myself to writing verses to Shirley's eyebrows. But first I shall ask Annetta when tea will be ready."

At that precise moment the door at the back of the big room opened and little Nancy Lester came in. Her hair was perfectly smooth; her plain dark dress was perfectly neat and speckless; when

she spoke her voice was even and unexcited ; but her face, as she first surveyed the room, wore the hunted look of a wild creature at bay and desperate. Instantly, however, at sight of the girls, it changed. "I'm so glad to see you," she smiled cordially. She turned to the tall man. "Tea's all ready in the studio. You wouldn't want it here in this mess, would you, Barry dear? Mother, won't you give them their tea? I don't care for any to-day, but I'll send the girls out for theirs in a minute. It was tea that you wanted me for, wasn't it, Mother? Well, it's just ready, and the scones won't be good cold."

"Then bring them here," boomed the fat artist. "I cannot leave this gnome I'm doing. Bring the tea here, Annetta. Hang the disorder! I'm making you a poster that you'll be proud of in years to come, but I insist on tea here—and now," he murmured, squinting absorbedly at the poster.

Nancy Lester looked down at him gravely, then she looked at Mrs. Lester, who was peering interestedly over his shoulder at the painting. "Mother," she began, "do get him to go to the studio."

"But I want to see him finish the gnome," objected Mrs. Lester serenely. "And Monsieur Capel is about to do a fairy. Please begin the fairy, Monsieur. Two can paint at once on such

a huge sheet of cardboard. Please let us have tea here, Annetta."

Nancy Lester shrugged faintly. "Will you and Barry bring the tea in here from the studio, Dickon?" she asked, and turned to the three girls. "You see it is my busy day, just as I said," she began pleadingly, in low tones. "So please believe me and don't make a fuss. I hate fusses so! Seems as if I couldn't stand one to-night. I'm sort of—tired."

"That's just why we've come," began Jane briskly. "To help you get dinner, I mean. Lloyd thought of it. They do it that way out in the Rockies. It's to be a dinner *à la* Western Slope, you see. Lloyd explained it all beautifully to your mother—all about hurrying the dinner, so you could get to the play in time. Lloyd explained it all, and that's why your mother called you." Jane looked hard at Nancy Lee for confirmation of her somewhat doubtful statements.

Nancy Lester, also, turned to her first and dearest friend. "You mean, Nancy dear," she began, "that my mother has consented to dine early and eat quickly and let me go?"

Nancy Lee faced the eager questioner without flinching. "No, she didn't—she hasn't yet," she admitted frankly. "But she's going to. She must. It's only right and fair. It's so little for

her to do, and you're giving up so much—spoiling so much—worrying us all so, and making us so miserable," ended Nancy, driven to that last pitiless phrase by the unconvinced look in Nancy Lester's big eyes.

Jane looked admiringly at Nancy Lee. "Of course your mother will let us help you," she declared confirmingly. "I'll ask her myself to make sure." Jane walked over to where Mrs. Lester, a lovely smile playing over her absorbed face, stood watching each brush-stroke of the fat artist. "Mrs. Lester," she began, "we may help Nancy, your daughter, mayn't we? You don't mind having a six o'clock dinner, do you? She wants to go to the play, you see. All Fair Oaks will be unhappy if she can't. Why, she's our principal actor and a perfectly splendid one too. We'll promise you a very good dinner. It will be *à la* Western Slope, you see,—because Lloyd"—Jane gestured vigorously—"Lloyd is a Westerner and it seems it's a Western custom to help your neighbors with their parties. It was Lloyd's idea for us to come, but we should have thought of it anyhow, I guess, because the play ——" Jane suddenly became aware that, besides the girls and Mrs. Lester, six men, one grey and distinguished, one a boy with a handsome face full of laughter, were listening to her story. There was another of

those abrupt pauses that had characterized the interview from the start. "You know all about our play, of course," ended Jane severely—the severity being for herself and her undignified hesitancy, not for Mrs. Lester.

"Do I 'know all about our play,' Annetta?" Mrs. Lester turned helplessly to her daughter, over whose expressive little face now played a look that was half distress at her mother's predicament and half relief and pleasure at Nancy's and Jane's and Lloyd's splendid coöperation in behalf of Maire Bruin.

"I told you, Mother," said Nancy Lester. "I said I was glad to have a part, and you said, 'Don't get stage-struck, Annetta, because you aren't planned on big enough lines to make a star.' Don't you remember saying that?"

Mrs. Lester chuckled good-humoredly. "I never remember my clever speeches, dearie—when I'm publicly accused of them. But I do vaguely recall the episode."

"This play is to-night at eight," went on Nancy Lester indifferently. "I gave you a ticket. You looked at it and thanked me and put it in the pocket of your studio apron, and then I suppose you forgot it. It—doesn't—matter, Mother."

"Oh, Nancy, you aren't coöp——" began Jane Learned, and stopped, in mid-air, as it were, open-

mouthed like a gasping fish, at a vigorous poke from Nancy Lee.

Mrs. Lester appeared to be trying hard to grasp the whole impossible situation. "But we never have dinner at six, Annetta," she protested. "With tea at five, it's absurd. Do you really want—you didn't tell me that, I'm sure. Of course it's all their fault,"—she waved at the six men,—"taking to-morrow as their sailing-date, I mean." She sighed despairingly. "The tea hasn't been poured. That's something I can do right away, isn't it, Annetta?"

Nancy Lester deftly rearranged the tea things on the big tray. "I only hope the scones have kept hot," she said anxiously, peering under a china cover. "Please sit down, Jane and Lloyd and Nancy Lee. I'll just get some extra cups for you ——"

"Wait, Ma'm'selle!" It was Monsieur Capel, grey, distinguished, and foreign, smiling delightfully at little Nancy Lester. "You will instead take your three friends and go to the kitchen to consider the dinner menu *de l' Ouest.* It interests me extremely, this Western Rockies dinner. My appetite will be prime for it at six by the clock. I shall refrain from ze scones after one, and I shall stand guard over the others. Scones we have had often from your kitchen, *bien delicieux,* but the

Western dinner is a novelty. Get on with your poster, Rugo, and give it a flavor *de l' Ouest.*" He bowed deferentially to his hostess. "Is it not proper that we so arrange for Ma'm'selle's evening engagements?"

While the girls waited breathlessly for her answer, Mrs. Lester poured four cups of tea, uncovered the scones, smiled contentedly at sight of them, and held out the plate and a cup to the boy Dickon.

"For Monsieur Capel," she said. "He likes his tea clear."

Then she suddenly observed that every one, and particularly Monsieur Capel, expected her to answer his question. Mrs. Lester seldom did what was expected of her, but it is difficult to withstand the expectations of six men you like and three girls you do not know. Mrs. Lester, however, merely held out another cup of tea to the boy Dickon. "For Rugo," she ordered, "but he mustn't spill it on the poster." Then she turned to her daughter. "Annetta, you are too little to have evening engagements," she declared pleasantly. "And where is Mary Ann?"

"Mary Ann is sick in bed, with a nurse in a white cap to look after her, Mother," said Nancy Lester quietly. "I told you all about that. But it doesn't matter about me—except——" She

smiled pathetically at the three girls and just perceptibly shook her sleek head. "Mother comes first," the smile and the head-shake said, "but indeed I'm sorry." Aloud she added, "Please don't think any more about it, Mother."

"If Annetta is old enough to keep house for you, Shirley," boomed the fat artist startlingly from the floor, "she is old enough to have evening engagements."

"Do you keep house for us, Annetta?" demanded Mrs. Lester.

"Of course she does!" tall Barry answered for her.

"And to-night she's also cooking for us," put in the merry-faced boy Dickon, "because Bob's faithful Mary Ann is incapacitated. I say, hurray for Annetta, and dinner when she gives the word." He smiled engagingly at Mrs. Lester. "Be a good sport, Shirley. You're getting too set in your ways. Give the rising generation a chance. Eat with the common herd for once, at six o'clock. We fellows don't care. We're hungry as bears this minute, and if we feed early we'll have all the longer evening with you around the studio fire."

"Very well, Dickon," returned Mrs. Lester imperturbably. "I don't mind in the least when I eat."

"Run along, Annetta and friends," ordered tall

Barry gaily. "Go to it! Dinner of the Western Slope sounds perfectly good to me."

"Do you want it all on one tin plate, where it belongs?" asked Lloyd Mallory, looking gravely around the room. Then she smiled her slow smile at their evident total lack of comprehension. "Don't worry," she said. "There probably wouldn't be tin plates enough in this house to go round."

There was a roar of laughter at that, and under cover of it the assistant cooks followed Annetta, who had flitted over to kiss her mother and then disappeared in her whirlwind fashion through the door at the back of the room.

Her three friends found her in the dining-room inspecting the table, which was laid for dinner.

"Soup spoon, two forks, two spoons, coffee spoon,—no knives," she murmured. Then she turned to the girls. "Just let me get the knives on before I forget again. And—after—that"—she put the knives in their places—"I've got to tell you yet another complication—a perfectly fatal one. I lent my costume to Mother to paint—you see I had no hopes of wearing it to-night, and this morning Mother was so bored and blue because her model didn't interest her. But she adored my costume and so did the model—the Pittsburgh plutocrat. And all was well. And then the stupid

model let it fall into the chocolate that was on the tray at luncheon, and I sent it off at once to New York to be cleaned, because I wished of course to return it in perfect order to the school. And there you are!" ended Nancy Lester despairingly. "After all your trouble and the boys' excitement and my happiness, when I got out here remembering silver, I also remembered—this."

"Nancy Lee," ordered Jane swiftly, "you make tracks for the school. We'll get this dinner ready somehow without you. Send the waitresses early; they'll help us out, if necessary, here. Get Mildred —she's Nancy's size—and the Costume Committee, and make over Christina's new green velvet afternoon dress for Maire Bruin-Lester to wear. Christina won't mind, if you say I said to."

"All right." Nancy Lee was already giving a good imitation of one of Nancy Lester's swift disappearances.

Little Nancy Lester sank down in the carved oak chair that belonged at the head of the dining-table. "How fast you do coöperate, Jane!" she sighed. "It quite takes my breath away. I'm so sorry about the dress—and—and—everything."

"You needn't be," said Jane brusquely. "You helped me out of a hole last week. Oh, you didn't know about it—not even about my being in the hole. But all the same you may just take it on

trust that you helped me out, because it's true. Christina helped me, too. We're twins, you know, so it doesn't matter about her dress—I mean she'd rather you had it, after you helped me. Now that's settled and the knives are on. Give me the silver polish and the coffee urn, and put Lloyd into an apron and tell her to hustle, Western style. This is going to be some party, believe me—slang or no slang. Yes, it is!"

CHAPTER XIII

ONLY BROOKS GO ON FOREVER

"WASN'T it all great?"

"Specially the sandwiches that our committee made."

"And the way Jane improvised, when the knock-at-the-door person forgot her cue."

"And when Bridget Bruin spilled the honey on the floor, and the Faery Child's feet stuck in it."

"Oh, it was all great, breaks and all, but most especially wasn't Nancy Lester a darling?"

"Whoever would have guessed she'd be as pretty as that, with nothing different but her hair fluffed out and a reasonably becoming dress?"

So the talk ran around the Fair Oaks breakfast tables the morning after the play.

"Jeanne Durand has had bad news from home." This was Kittie Westervelt, her tone full of importance. "Her oldest brother is wounded—was wounded, I should say. The letter's a month old."

"Then he may be dead by this time," observed Phyllis Knight coldly. "News a month old is ——"

"Sh!" Lloyd Mallory, who had kept a kindly watch all the year over the little French girl, had seen her coming. "Don't speak to her about it, poor thing! Talk about something else, quick."

But of course everybody was tongue-tied, as Jeanne, white-lipped and tremulous, slipped into her place at the table. Suddenly the smallest Mabel burst out with, "Nancy Lester's mother never came to the play. Eloise Mason's mother traveled all the way from Chicago to see it, and Mrs. Lester never took the trouble just to walk up the street."

"Morning, Jeanne!" It was Nancy Lee's cheerful voice. "Mrs. Lester had company last night, Small Mabel. That's why she couldn't come."

"Huh!" sniffed the Dorothy who had been brought up on elocution lessons. "My mother always goes to hear me recite. Ever since I was a four-year-old kiddie, speaking a piece at a Sunday-school entertainment, I've fixed my eyes on Mother and reeled off my lines. It would take a lot more than company to keep my mother from hearing me recite."

"So would it mine," piped up the smallest Mabel again. "Nancy Lester felt bad about her mother's not coming. I spoke about it to her and she said what Nancy Lee did about company, but

all the same she felt bad. Her voice shook, the way it does when a person feels bad."

"She was tired," Lloyd Mallory explained tactfully to the table. "She had so much to do that afternoon, and then her costume turned up missing."

"Yes! Her mother and her mother's friend spilled paint or something on it," interpolated the smallest Mabel indefatigably. "Isn't it funny to have a mother that gets spots on your clothes, 'stead of your doing it yourself?"

"They're a very queer family, to put it mildly," announced the Dorothy with the attentive mother. She felt bitter over the fact that her elocutionary training had not secured her a place in the cast of "The Land of Heart's Desire."

"Queer's the word," commented Phyllis Knight glibly. "If you don't want to say more, queer will cover it, I guess. But before I cooked dinner for one of Mrs. Lester's parties of foreigners from New York, I should want to *define* the word queer, and be sure I'd defined it right."

"Phyllis Knight,"—Jane Learned's voice was cool and even, but very determined—"if there's one girl at this table who'd better not cast slurs, that girl is you. You know what I mean,—the reason why you have no right to say such things," ended Jane significantly.

Jane had had a memorable interview with Phyllis about the skiing contest. Since the twins' reconciliation, she had twice matched repartee with Phyllis on other matters and come out victorious. Phyllis had gradually acquired a wholesome respect for the tall twin's tongue. She hated Jane for her cutting characterization of the skiing episode, and more for the way she had, almost without effort, won back Christina. It was all just one more bitter experience to add to those that Phyllis had heaped together in her short life; Jane was just one more enemy to be implacably fought, in the open when that served best, or under cover, if cover was more advantageous. And little Nancy Lester, the girl whom everybody had suddenly begun to admire and to pet, whose queer little ways, eccentric mother and handsome suitor had fired the imagination of Fair Oaks,—Nancy Lester was just another challenge to something in Phyllis, to the swift, relentless jealousy that all her life had had its way with her, until it had grown to be the dominating fact in her life. Where Nancy Lester "noticed" and loved and pitied and tried to help, Phyllis Knight sneered and hated and tried to make trouble. And the baffled, hopeless look that Phyllis faced in her mirror, when she was alone and off her guard, showed what a dreary place Phyllis-All-Alone Knight,

with all her jealousies and quarrels and resentments, had made out of the big beautiful world in which she might have been living. "Kindness opens your life—makes it bigger. Quarrels and resentments shut it up." That was how Jane Learned had put the matter to herself the night she "made up" with Christina. She had been thinking then only of herself, as compared with Noticing Nancy Lester. But Phyllis Knight's life made a far sharper contrast, for where Jane had shut out only her twin, Phyllis shut out everybody, hated everybody, resented everything. Nancy Lester's world was wide and sunny, open to the blue sky. Jane's, before she "made up" with her twin, had had always one black, threatening, angry cloud over it. But Phyllis's was so small, so walled-in, so storm-swept, that it was more like a cheerless city tenement than a world, and poor Phyllis was like a tenement-dweller, starved, unhappy, her hand against every man, and every man's hand, she thought, against her. And so at breakfast the morning after the play, Phyllis, knowing perfectly well that Jane referred to the skiing episode, did not quite dare to risk any more disparaging remarks about the Lesters. So she only shrugged angrily and looked round the table. The dejected droop of Jeanne Durand's shoulders irritated her.

"No use to pull such a long face over news that's a month old," she sneered.

"Oh, Phyllis!" exclaimed Nancy Lee, aghast at such utter heartlessness. "She means to cheer you up, Jeanne," Nancy went on, smiling kindly at the little French girl. "She means that your brother is convalescing by this time—back in the trenches, maybe, or flirting with a pretty nurse in a hospital."

"He was taken to the American hospital at Neuilly," said Jeanne solemnly. "So it would be an American nurse."

"Well, some American nurses are peaches, Jeanne," Jane jested gaily, "so you needn't be at all down-hearted about his falling for one. She'll teach him American slang, probably, as I used to teach you. And when the war is over, they'll marry and come over here to visit you, and we'll have the greatest reunion going. Did Miss MacPherson get any letters in this mail?"

"Yes, her oldest brother is in England on leave —or was a week ago," explained Jeanne.

"I wonder if Nancy Lester heard from her Mr. Bob," speculated Kittie, who had never worn the edge off her interest in Nancy Lester's good-looking friend.

"Ask her to see the postmark on his letter, if she says she did," murmured Phyllis Knight in

Kittie's ear, under cover of pushed-back chairs. "I'll wager it's 'somewhere in France,' namely, the German trenches."

To which insinuation Kittie, who was no match in wit for Phyllis and had not Jane's secret weapon to wield, could only respond with a withering glare.

When Nancy Lester arrived—barely on time—for her history class, she looked so tired and worn and worried that even heedless Kittie hesitated to ask a question that might stir unhappy memories.

"Don't you feel pretty proud of yourself?" was the opening note in the chorus of applause that greeted the ex-star's entrance.

"Mrs. Tom Grant says you've got wonderful dramatic talent. She knows, because she was on the stage herself—a real actress."

"Miss Dutton knows just as well, if she wasn't ever an actress. She thought you were great."

"Why don't you fluff out your hair all the time?" This was Kitty Westervelt. "It's piles more becoming. Why, last night you were a regular beauty, Nancy Lester!"

Nancy Lester listened with a wan little smile and a recurrent "Thank you," that was sincere if rather absent-minded, to the school's babel of congratulation.

"I have not studied to-day's lesson," she

responded to Miss Dutton's demand for information about William of Orange's claim to the English throne. "I was—of course it's no excuse to say that I was busy."

At the end of the class Nancy Lee waited for her. "You look as if you needed some more coöperation to-day," she hazarded cheerfully. "Did you 'notice' something extra bothering this morning? You look worried."

"Oh, I am fearfully worried," responded little Nancy Lester. "But alas, it's nothing to help about. It's the war—and Mr. Bob. He's in it, you know, in a French Red Cross ambulance corps, right behind the trenches. I had a letter this morning, just a note—an 'interlude between shells,' he called it. Oh, yes, I'm fearfully worried, but I can't do anything."

"Have the other men gone?" asked Nancy Lee. "I mean the last night's dinner-party."

Nancy Lester nodded. "At two o'clock this morning they left for their train, singing the Marseillaise and waking up all the neighbors. Does it seem to you, Nancy, that if she could talk to them till two in the morning, my mother might have spared just a few moments to come to the play? Barry wanted to come with her, just for a 'look-in,' he said, and the rest urged her to go; but she said it was too much trouble going out on

a cold night. Oh, well, of course she hates the cold, and if I weren't just silly, with being so tired and worried about Mr. Bob, I shouldn't mind her not coming."

"How's Mary Ann?" asked Nancy, tactfully changing the subject.

"Better. She sent the nurse away and got up this morning. She said she felt in need of a decent cup of tea. She likes it so strong, the nurse said, that it will stand alone."

Nancy Lee laughed. "Then some of your troubles are over."

"Ye-es." Noticing Nancy hesitated. "Some of my little troubles, maybe, though I don't imagine Mary Ann will be anything but fearfully, desperately cantankerous, if she sticks it out and stays up till I get home this noon. And cantankerousness in the atmosphere is more troublesome than peace and doing it all yourself. And the big trouble—Mr. Bob's eyes, I mean—will go right on. And my job will go right on. But as for me—only brooks go on forever."

"Won't you tell me about Mr. Bob's eyes?" asked Nancy Lee.

"He thinks that perhaps a shell shattered a nerve. It made only a small, unimportant flesh wound, but he thinks he's going—he thinks—I think I'm going—out."

Nancy Lee turned in surprise at the curious incoherence of Nancy Lester's last words, just in time to see the little figure beside her sway lightly, like a flower in the wind, then topple to the floor, and crumple there in a tumbled heap, her little white face upturned.

For a minute Nancy Lee stared helplessly. For a minute more she tried to think what Miss MacPherson had said about fainting, in her first-aid lecture. Loosened clothes, water, salts—that was part of it anyhow. The nearest water was miles away, to Nancy Lee's excited imagination, and she had no idea whatever about the location of the nearest salts. It had all sounded easy enough in the lecture, but now Nancy's mind was full of doubts and questions. One thought emerged: she needed help. Stooping swiftly, she straightened the limp little figure into a less strained position, then she got up and ran back around a turn in the corridor to the nearest group of girls, which happened to contain Kittie Westervelt and Plain Mary Smith.

She caught Mary's arm. "Go and bring water," she gasped. "Kittie, get a salts bottle. The rest find Miss MacPherson. Nancy Lester's fainted—or something."

Nancy Lee plunged back down the hall to her patient and knelt beside her, struggling, with

fingers that trembled, to undo the five hooks that were Nancy Lester's maximum amount of dress-fastening. A fan—Miss MacPherson had mentioned fanning. So, when she had followed the injunction about loosened clothes, Nancy Lee took her largest note-book and began flapping it vigorously.

"Doesn't she look ghastly?" said a voice.

Nancy Lee glanced up to find a huddled crowd of girls behind her. "Please call Miss MacPherson," she ordered tremulously. "And move off. She needs all the air."

"Here's the water." Mary Smith's eagerness to get it to Nancy Lee resulted in splashing part of her burden straight in Nancy Lester's white face. A queer convulsive quiver swept across it; her eyes fluttered open, then drooped shut again instantly.

But Nancy Lee breathed a sigh of glad relief. She had never seen any one faint away before, and the white face and limp form of her little protegée had suggested to her inexperience terrible possibilities. She could fan and bathe now with some semblance of calmness until Miss MacPherson arrived.

"The salts." Kittie thrust forward a cut-glass bottle, and Nancy Lee grabbed at it eagerly and held it under her namesake's nose.

"Don't put it so near," Kittie cautioned. "They're strong."

Evidently they were. Nancy Lester sneezed, opened her eyes again, and, lifted between Nancy and Kittie, drank what of Mary's water had not been spilled over her or swabbed on a handkerchief. So Miss MacPherson, arriving at this juncture, had nothing to do but congratulate the girls on their first-aid work and then pick up Nancy Lester in her strong arms and carry her to the couch in Miss Marshall's sitting-room.

"Come along and tell me about it," she threw over her shoulder to Nancy Lee. "This child mustn't talk." Nancy Lee followed meekly, with Kittie's salts-bottle and Mary's empty glass. But in spite of Miss MacPherson's injunctions Nancy Lester did talk while she was being carried.

"I was so tired that I—stopped," she announced dreamily. "I was talking to Nancy Lee and I—went out. She wanted—I wanted—I'm—going out—again."

When Nancy Lester once more returned to consciousness, she was lying on Miss Marshall's big white bed and Miss MacPherson, in the crisp white nursing costume that she wore when a girl was ill, was sitting beside her with a finger on her pulse.

"Don't say one word," Miss MacPherson or-

dered briskly, when she saw her patient's big eyes staring at her.

Nancy Lester smiled. "I haven't anything to say," she murmured, and lay quiet for some time. "Where am I?" she demanded finally.

Miss MacPherson explained. "Now the thing for you to do is to go to sleep again. Please don't try to talk."

Once more Nancy Lester's face lighted to a smile. "I can't go to sleep again, exactly," she averred, "because I haven't been asleep. I just—went out, the way a candle does when it's all used up. What time is it?"

"Twelve noon," Miss MacPherson consulted her businesslike wrist-watch.

Nancy Lester started up agilely. "I must go home," she said. "It's time for Mother's luncheon-tray and Mary Ann is probably cantankerous enough to ——"

"Lie down, my dear," Miss MacPherson was kind but firm. "You shall go home by and by. You're not fit to bother with trays just yet."

"Oh, but I must go home!" wailed Nancy Lester. "It's necessary; really it is. Oh, you don't understand. Oh, please call Nancy Lee. She will explain. She will make you see ——"

"Sh, sh, my dear! I'll fetch Nancy Lee, if you

promise to be still while I'm gone, and then to let Nancy Lee do all the explaining."

Five minutes' talk, in which Nancy Lee explained about Mrs. Lester, the Pittsburgh model, Mary Ann's grippe, and Mr. Bob's eyes—that she didn't know about herself,—left Miss MacPherson still insistent on an afternoon's perfect quiet for her patient, and Nancy Lester adamant on the necessity of going home immediately.

"I must! I must! Oh, please let me! Please take me! I'll be quiet there. I can't be, if I stay here. Don't you see that I can't?" Her color rose dangerously; her little white hands clenched in determination; her lips were dry with feverish terror.

"Couldn't we take her home now and put her to bed there?" suggested Nancy Lee at last. "Seems as if we'd about have to."

"You're right." Miss MacPherson pacified Nancy Lester with the promise, and telephoned for a closed carriage. "You'd better come along," she told Nancy Lee in an aside. "The child is really very ill, I'm afraid. If anything should happen ——"

Wide-eyed with apprehension, Nancy Lee got her coat and hat, walked on one side of her namesake, as they supported her wobbly steps to the carriage, and climbed in herself. She was not

needed on the way; Nancy Lester, quiet in deference to Miss MacPherson's absurd but harmless restriction, lay back in her corner, smiling happily across at her first and best Fair Oaks friend.

But when they got to the little grey house, there was more trouble. "You must not help me up the walk. Oh, please!" she begged convulsively. "It will disturb my mother. She was up late last night, and this morning she has been painting the Pittsburgh person, and there was no fairy costume to help her endure it. And I am late. She will be watching. She must not be alarmed or disturbed."

"But, dearie, you can't walk all that way by yourself," Miss MacPherson told her. "If you try, you'll 'go out' again, sure as sure."

"Oh, dear!" Nancy Lester leaned forward and buried her face on Nancy Lee's shoulder. "I can't seem—'seem to suit,' as Mary Ann says. I don't suit any one! There are fusses all the time, and I get so tired. But the worst thing of all is bothering Mother. She doesn't care much for me. She isn't proud of me. She didn't come to the play last night. So I must walk in by myself. I must! I must!" She lifted her head, and her eyes, deliriously bright again with fever and excitement, flashed defiance at Miss MacPherson.

"I'll tell you what!" Nancy Lee came once more to the rescue. "Miss MacPherson, I'll help

Nancy in. We'll walk along arm in arm, just like any two girls, and her mother won't notice anything, and Nancy won't get tired and 'go out.'"

"That's the idea!" cried Miss MacPherson, with a grateful glance at Nancy Lee. "Why can't I walk along with you, just like another girl? Do I look so fearfully old?"

"You don't look a bit old," declared Nancy Lester loyally. "Of course you may come too. Only—let me tell my mother myself. I understand how to tell her things."

It was a long way up the path between the box hedges to the weather-worn door with the brass knocker. Poor little Nancy Lester stumbled along bravely, leaning hard on the two friendly arms; somehow she got up the steps, and then in they went.

"Oh, Annetta!" cried a gay voice, as the door opened. "I'm hungry and tired and cross. I've sent that woman to her hotel for the rest of the day. Mary Ann is up-stairs, and won't answer her bell. I want creamed crab-meat for luncheon, and Souchong tea. Oh, and jam, Annetta—lots of jam!"

"Yes, Mother, in—just—a minute," answered Nancy Lester, sinking breathlessly into a carved chair in the dusky hall. "I'll attend to it all in just a minute."

"WHY ARE YOU SITTING THERE?"

The strange catch and quiver in her daughter's voice brought Mrs. Lester, still in her paint-stained apron, over the wonderfully embroidered mandarin-coat, to the hall door. "Why, Annetta," she gasped, "I didn't know you'd brought in friends. You never do. You shouldn't have let me retail the family troubles —— Annetta, why are you sitting there, looking so queer? Are you hurt or sick, or have you had bad news or anything?"

"I guess—I'm—through—just for to-day, I mean, Mother. I guess I've got to go to bed. Please go and tell Mary Ann to come and help me a little. She won't answer her bell, but she'll answer that. Oh, don't you bother, Mother! Nancy Lee will go and tell her, if you'll just show her the stairs."

But Mrs. Lester had gone herself, in pattering, high-heeled haste. In a minute she was back, quite breathless. "She's coming right away, Annetta," she gasped. "What can she do? What can I do?" She turned helplessly to Miss MacPherson. "It was sweet of you to bring Annetta home, you and Miss Nancy-I-can't-think-what. You were here last night, and you ran off before dinner. Barry was so sorry. Have you had your lunch? Because there isn't any ready here yet, and now ——"

"Oh, Mother, please don't worry about lunch-

eon." Nancy Lester stood up totteringly, as if in answer to the gentle exasperation in her mother's complaint. "But—I can't get any, I'm afraid. Miss MacPherson must go back to the school. She's bothered with me all the morning. But maybe Nancy will stay, and Mary Ann, after I've explained it all to her, will get luncheon for you two, and Nancy will cheer you up, instead of my doing it. Because I'm not feeling very cheering to-day, and I'm sorry to have bothered and frightened every one, and now I'm going to lie down. And by dinner time I shall be all right again."

"I'm going to see you tucked in properly before I leave," Miss MacPherson insisted kindly but firmly. "I'm in charge of the Fair Oaks girls' health, and you mustn't speak of bothering me by being taken a bit ill. Isn't it better to bother me than your mother?" Miss MacPherson was taking a page from Nancy Lee's book of methods.

"Very well," agreed Nancy Lester. "Oh, Nancy dear, would you mind calling Mary Ann —when you speak to her or when she's around to hear, would you mind calling her Marie Antoinette? Mr. Bob did and I do. It pleases her so!"

Mary Ann, alias Marie Antoinette, did not get luncheon for two that noon, though she would gladly have done so. The doctor, whom Mrs.

Lester summoned at Miss MacPherson's suggestion, kept her so busy getting hot water bottles, ice-bags, cold compresses, and hot poultices ready for him, and all these activities so alarmed the already frightened Mrs. Lester, that the minor difficulty about luncheon was completely forgotten by every one except possibly Nancy Lee, who had a very healthy young appetite. So perhaps it was one for Mrs. Lester and two for herself, as the proverb has it, that made Nancy Lee think, in mid-afternoon, about tea, and set about getting it. There were fresh crumpets in the bread-box, Mary Ann, interrogated as Marie Antoinette, told her. Fortunately Nancy expected, after her namesake's confidences on the subject of Mary Ann's cantankerousness about crumpets, to toast them herself, but Mary Ann volunteered to arrange the tray. Between them, they persuaded Mrs. Lester to try to eat something.

The doctor had just left, and Mrs. Lester was half frightened, half angry, and wholly bewildered by the things he had said to her. Being bereft of her daughter as a buffet between herself and a trying world, she turned instinctively to the person nearest at hand, and that person, Mary Ann having retired to her own quarters, happened to be Nancy Lee.

"He says Annetta's not dangerously ill," she

explained, "but she needs a trained nurse and absolute quiet, and it may be for months. That sounds dangerous, doesn't it? And he thinks I haven't looked after her properly. I wanted to. I meant to. I've always given her whatever she wanted, but that wasn't much. Now when I was a girl, I wanted millions of things. But Annetta's different. I don't understand her. She's so clever and so capable, and she never tells me things—silly little things that other girls want to talk about. I love Annetta dearly, Miss Nancy Somebody, but I don't understand her at all. I don't see why that doctor should blame her illness on me. I think she's caught the grippe from Mary Ann, but he says it isn't grippe that's the matter with her. He wouldn't tell me what it is. He said, 'When I come again we'll talk about that.'"

"Oh, well, he won't be here again till to-morrow," said Nancy comfortingly. "By that time she'll be lots better, and you'll feel better, and ——"

"He's coming again to-night," cut in Mrs. Lester swiftly. "Now doesn't that look dangerous? But how am I to blame?"

"I suppose," said Nancy slowly, feeling that some answer was expected of her, and not daring to come out with what she thought was the true one,—"I suppose he meant she'd done too much

lately, since Mary Ann was sick. She told me this morning that she felt dreadfully tired."

"She didn't tell me," Mrs. Lester pouted over her perfectly toasted crumpet. "So how should I know? How am I to blame?"

"Well, of course you might have noticed how much she was doing," said downright Nancy Lee. "We girls call your daughter Noticing Nancy, Mrs. Lester. Jane Learned gave her the name the day you bought her Captain, because she notices everything that nobody else does, like Captain and the little teacher that cried, and the starved child, and then she always finds a way ——"

"Wait!" commanded Mrs. Lester peremptorily. "You say I bought her 'Captain.' What in the world is 'Captain'?"

"Why, a horse," explained Nancy a trifle impatiently. "The horse you bought for her of the Italian. Don't you remember?"

In spite of all her worries, Mrs. Lester chuckled. "And she named him Captain, did she?" she repeated, as if to herself. "Well, she'd better change to Major now." She smiled at Nancy Lee. "Bob Endicott got his Captain's commission in the French Army the day I bought Annetta her horse," she explained, "and now he's a major. But of course I know you can't change a horse's name. Annetta and I wanted to once, in the days

when people had horses, but my husband explained to us that we simply couldn't do such a thing. Annetta was only a baby, but she'd remember, I'm sure. She's got a wonderful memory, especially for things connected with her father." Mrs. Lester paused, sighed, and turned suddenly upon Nancy Lee. "And so you think I ought to have noticed that Annetta was tired?"

"Oh, Mrs. Lester, I didn't say so!" began Nancy Lee. And then, remembering all that Noticing Nancy had told her, all that she had seen for herself, influenced, above all, by the pathos of Nancy Lester's little upturned white face when she first "went out," in Fair Oaks hall, Nancy Lee took a sudden resolve. "Well, I do think so," she went on bravely. "I mean, it seems as if a mother would naturally notice things like that. Mine would."

Mrs. Lester considered, staring hard at Nancy Lee. "That's just what that doctor said," she acknowledged finally, in a queer hard voice. "'A mother's perception is generally keen enough to avoid this sort of thing.' That's what he said to me. Well, what else haven't I done that your mother would do, Nancy Somebody?"

It took courage again to answer truthfully, but Nancy Lee did it. "The worst thing is, you haven't been proud of her," she declared. "You

didn't act as if you cared when she had a part in the play, and you didn' t come to see her in it. And she was tired, and so she was extra hurt about your not coming. Generally, she said, she wouldn't have minded."

"She told you that?" Mrs. Lester's voice thrilled with pity, partly for herself, partly for her daughter. "Oh, why didn't she tell me?"

Nancy tried hard to think what to say to that. "Maybe just because, as you said, you don't understand her, Mrs. Lester. Jane Learned says that the reason everybody who's in trouble tells Noticing Nancy about it, is because she always understands. If people aren't going to understand, it wouldn't be much use to tell them things, would it now?" Nancy propounded this last point with the enthusiasm of a discoverer. In trying to explain Jane's idea to Mrs. Lester, she had unwittingly driven it home to herself.

Mrs. Lester had been wearing her studio apron all the afternoon. Now, glancing down at it, she unbuttoned it, folded it carefully, and put it into a drawer of the big table. Then she went to the telephone and called up her Pittsburgh sitter.

"The portrait must go over for a while," she announced blandly. "My little daughter is ill. A nurse? Yes, she has an excellent nurse, I believe. No, it must go over. I'll write you. Oh, in a

month perhaps. At present I'm too busy. Busy, I said—busy being a mother." She came back to Nancy Lee, who, not having been spoken to during all these arrangements, was beginning to feel a little in the way.

"Anything more?" Mrs. Lester demanded abruptly.

Nancy thought swiftly. "She loved my pink crêpe negligee. She spoke of it one day when she got caught in the rain and I lent her some of my clothes. I think she'd like a pink crêpe negligee to dress up in when she's better. She likes pretty clothes, Mrs. Lester, only ——"

"Anything more?" broke in Mrs. Lester, as if she considered the topic of clothes exhausted.

"Oh, she loves you, Mrs. Lester," cried Nancy Lee suddenly, as if by inspiration. "She just about worships you. And she *likes* to be busy, and to see about you and the things she notices and helps about. She's crazy about her 'job,' as she calls it. So don't you be unhappy now, because it will make her unhappy if you are."

For a long minute Mrs. Lester stared hard at Nancy Lee. "I begin to understand," she said at last. "I suppose I'm very stupid at it, or else you girls are very, very clever. But now that you and the doctor have 'put me on,' in popular parlance, I think I can hold down my job—my job of being

a mother. Will you come round to-morrow afternoon and 'put me on' to some more things? You say Annetta loves me dearly. Well, I love Annetta. I'd do almost anything for her. I'll—I'll even call her Nancy, if she wants me to, though I think it's a very ugly name,—an unsuitable name for her, I mean, Nancy Somebody. It's perfectly right for you. Do you understand what I mean?"

Nancy Lee laughed. "I know. Nancy Lester told me. I'm your idea of a Nancy,—big and strong and red-cheeked and lively, and I can't understand poetry and I'd rather play ball than read fairy tales."

Mrs. Lester nodded briskly, also laughing. "You've been the best sort of friend for my funny, prim, poetical, serious-minded, philanthropic little daughter; I can see that," she said. "And to-day you've been a good friend to me, cheering, as Annetta asked you to be, and also informing—oh, very, very informing!"

"You're sure you don't mind my having spoken right out?" asked Nancy Lee anxiously.

"Mind, my dear! Mind?" repeated Mrs. Lester. "Why, Nancy Somebody, the people who speak right out, in words, in deeds,—in paint, as I do,—the people who speak right out and tell the truth as they see it, are the people who count, who make this world go round. Come again to-morrow,

Nancy Somebody, and see how I'm holding down my job. And speak right out whenever you think I need it. Good-night, my dear. I'm going upstairs to begin on my job of being a mother."

CHAPTER XIV

NANCY LESTER'S PERFECTLY GOOD NEW JOB

A CLOUD brooded over Fair Oaks School, and a darker one shadowed the little grey house with the knocker. Nancy Lester was very, very ill.

"A low fever, complicated by extreme nervous exhaustion," the doctor told Mrs. Lester. "No, I am not worried—yet. You'd better keep out of her room as much as possible; you overexcite her."

The doctor had never known any famous artists before. He found Mrs. Lester's vagaries very annoying, and he disliked her, besides, as an unmotherly mother.

For a few days Mrs. Lester obeyed orders strictly. This was because she was fully occupied with reorganizing her domestic staff and buying pretty clothes for her daughter's convalescence, as Nancy Lee had suggested. When a second maid and the pink crêpe de chine negligee, with high-heeled satin boudoir slippers to match, and a wonderfully belaced and beribboned petticoat to wear under it, all arrived by the same train from New York, Mrs.

Lester displayed her acquisitions proudly to the doctor. He ignored the maid, and waved away the negligee.

"She isn't ready for that sort of thing," he objected. "Keep her quiet—if you know the meaning of the word. Tell your friends that I insist upon complete rest."

"I haven't any friends in this town," Mrs. Lester informed him airily.

"Then who keeps that knocker banging all day?" demanded the doctor savagely. "It goes all the time I'm here, and presumably all the time I'm not."

"I'm sure I don't know who they all are," Mrs. Lester pouted. "One that came to-day was a half-starved child from a down-town tenement. One said she was a teacher in a public school in the country near here, and another was a tin-peddler. Oh, yes, there was a Mrs. Grant, who came in a limousine; she'd seen Annetta in a school play, she said. The others didn't explain themselves. All I know is, they seem to know and like Annetta, and somehow they've heard she's ill. The tin-peddler brought her a pink geranium."

"He did?" The doctor was suddenly interested. "You mean the old Frenchman, Joe LaRose? How'd old Joe LaRose happen to bring your daughter a pink geranium?"

"How should I know why he brought it?" Mrs. Lester burst out irritably. "And just because I don't know all the things you ask me"—her voice broke pitifully—"you think I—don't—love—Annetta. You've no right to think so—nor to ask me so many questions."

The doctor beat a nervous tattoo on the arm of his easy chair and glared at her in exasperation. "I'm thinking not of you, but of my patient," he informed her curtly. "Her case is a puzzling one, Mrs. Lester, and—I don't want to alarm you unnecessarily, but it is beginning to worry me. She doesn't improve. She doesn't pick up. Her fever comes back every afternoon, the best we can do, and nearly every night she's more or less out of her head. She seems to be worrying about a lot of things; if we knew what they were, we might manage better. But if you don't know —if you're not involved in any way—why, of course you can't help."

"Involved?" repeated Mrs. Lester questioningly. "How do you mean—involved?"

"Er—concerned, I should say," revised the doctor, watching her face closely; and then abruptly he changed the subject. "Did you know, Mrs. Lester, that we're on the verge of war with Germany?"

"Splendid!" cried Mrs. Lester eagerly. "I've

been so ashamed of us ever since Belgium was invaded. Did you tell Annetta?"

"Certainly not!" thundered the doctor. "And you're not to. Your daughter already has too many war-items on her mind."

"All the same, she ought to know this," insisted Mrs. Lester. "She'd get better if she knew it. For one thing, it means that Bob Endicott will come home. He said he'd come back to enlist under his own colors as soon as his country gave him the chance. Annetta will adore having him around for a while between times."

"U-m-m. Is Endicott the Mr. Bob whose eyes your daughter talks about when she's delirious?" inquired the doctor.

Mrs. Lester nodded absently. "He's the one. He's with a French Red Cross ambulance corps. The last letter we had came the day Annetta was taken ill, and he spoke of just having got a slight wound that seemed in some strange way to affect his sight. That's what Annetta is thinking of, I suppose."

"I see," said the doctor. "And is your daughter—particularly interested in this gentleman?"

"Particularly interested?" repeated Mrs. Lester idly. "Why, of course she is. Bob Endicott is a dear, and he's an old, old friend of our —— Certainly not!" she denied indignantly, as the doctor's

triumphant smile suddenly gave her the clue to his meaning. "Why, Annetta is only a child! I may not know much about her in some ways, but I certainly know that!"

"Oh, all right then," said the doctor resignedly. "If a sick girl's in love, we've got something to go on. But if you're sure she isn't—— Another thing she talks about in her delirium is her 'job.' Know anything about that?"

"Annetta hasn't any job, doctor," Mrs. Lester asserted with positiveness. "She's in school—a day-pupil at Fair Oaks. She might mean her lessons, perhaps."

Again the doctor stared hard at Mrs. Lester. "So you really have no idea, madam, that your daughter's mental perturbation and depression can have any special connection with some personal plan of yours or hers for—er—war work?"

"Of course it can't," cried Mrs. Lester, "because we haven't any such plan, Annetta and I. Annetta is too young, and what sort of Red Cross nurse, or nurse's aid, or whatever, should I make, do you think?"

"Really, Mrs. Lester——" he began, when she interrupted rudely.

"Oh, don't let's delay over that; I didn't expect an answer. The point is, doctor, I'll give you just three days more. If Annetta isn't better then, I

shall show her the negligee, and get her a huge bunch of violets, and an armful of pretty stories—all the things that girls like—and I shall read to her and amuse her and pet her all day, as I'd like to be read to and amused and petted if I were ill. What Annetta needs, in my opinion, is a lot of mothering."

"Exactly!" agreed the doctor excitedly, before he thought. "Only ——" He stopped dead in utter confusion.

"Only you think I'm a silly, flighty, incompetent mother," Mrs. Lester accused him vehemently. "Well, all the same, I'm the only mother Annetta has, and whether or not I've neglected her, as I can see you think, she loves me. The Nancy person—that's a girl at Annetta's school, who seems to know all about Annetta—told me that Annetta loved me dearly. Oh, the nurse can stay on, to look after trays and medicines and all such things, that I certainly should be no earthly good at; but I'm going to try my hand at mothering, as the Nancy person advised, and I may be a good deal better at it than you think."

"Go to it, then," ordered the doctor, beginning to admire Mrs. Lester in spite of himself. "Only no callers, remember, and try to realize that a little amusement goes a long way in a sick-room."

And so into Nancy Lester's plain little room, where she had never had time to put up any chintzes, swept Mrs. Lester, with the violets, the pink negligee, and almost a literal armful of amusing stories.

"You've been bored with the quiet long enough, Annetta-Nancy," she announced, "so I've come to cheer you up. Nurse, you may sit across the hall. I never can be really amusing before strangers."

Mrs. Lester read aloud beautifully. She interviewed all her daughter's callers and gave entertaining versions of what happened. She named all the plants that were sent in, and insisted that Nancy's favorite, "Lovely Pinkie," a huge pot of pink tulips, should be the first to come and the last to go every night and morning—for of course the sick-room was too cold at night for flowers. She spread the pink negligee enticingly over a chair, with the petticoat under it and the slippers on the floor beneath.

"That's what you'll look like presently, Annetta," she said. "So you must hurry and feel like sitting up. And when you get out again, I think you ought to have a blue coat like the Nancy person's. Not exactly like hers of course, but that same festive shade of blue. Shouldn't you like one?"

"Oh, yes, Mother," responded Nancy Lester po-

litely, "only you must not bother. My clothes don't matter. Please don't fuss over me, Mother. Go down-stairs and paint, or have a party, or go and have fun in New York. I shall be all right. Oh, it's lovely to have you here, but it doesn't seem—natural."

She was delighted with the pink negligee; it was sixty times prettier than Nancy Lee's, she said; but her desire to wear it did not improve her appetite, or make her, when she thought her mother was not watching, any less listless and dispirited.

"I'm a flat failure as an entertainer," Mrs. Lester told the doctor, when she had had her way for a week.

"Don't be so hard on yourself," he encouraged. "At least the child hasn't had a relapse. She's a little stronger, I think. She's pretty nearly stopped going out of her head."

"But she hasn't stopped worrying," Mrs. Lester objected. "She's still got something on her mind, just as you said she had, that keeps her from getting well; and she doesn't offer to tell me what it is. I suppose"—Mrs. Lester's mind reverted to her talk with Nancy Lee—"I suppose she thinks I shouldn't understand. I probably shouldn't. Annetta isn't a bit the kind of girl I was, at her age."

"She is an odd little kid," mused the doctor. "Only thing she'll talk to me about is my poorest, sickest patients. Oh, I've tried plenty of more cheerful topics, but none of 'em work. And she won't tell me a thing about herself, except symptoms."

Mrs. Lester frowned intently over the problem. "Those Fair Oaks girls seemed to know all about Annetta. Their spring vacation is over now in a day or two. If they came to see her, perhaps she'd confide in them. Then they could explain to us and her little worries, whatever they are, could be eliminated."

"I tell you, she's not well enough for a lot of company," snapped the doctor, and muttered "little worries!" under his breath.

Mrs. Lester smiled at him tauntingly. "You had your chance first, please remember, with your perfect rest cure. And it didn't work. I haven't done her any harm—you said so yourself. Nancy Somebody won't do her any harm either. Incidentally, one person isn't 'a lot of company.' I shall telephone Miss Nancy the minute she's back."

But Nancy Lee, confronted with Mrs. Lester's eager demand that she should come and find out what was weighing on Nancy Lester's mind, insisted that Jane must come too.

"She's the clever one," Nancy explained mod-

estly. "She has all the ideas. It was Jane, you know, who named your daughter Noticing Nancy. She's the one to find out for you about the worries."

"Then both of you must come," Mrs. Lester decreed. "I don't know whether you're specially clever, Nancy Somebody, but you're very cheering, and you give one a lot of information. I've missed you all your vacation, not coming in to suggest things every mother ought to do. And Annetta likes you best of all. So I shall tell Annetta-Nancy that you and the Jane person are coming to see us to-morrow."

"Annetta's in my room to-day," Mrs. Lester explained, meeting the girls next day with an eager welcome, at the head of the stairs. "I wormed it out of her that she was beginning to be very much bored by her own wall-paper, so she's moved. Run along in. You'll get on better without me."

Mrs. Lester's room was a rose-and-white bower, with an old-fashioned canopied four-post bed in one corner, and a very new-fashioned white wicker *chaise longe* by the fireplace. Nancy Lester was lying on that. She was wearing the pink kimono, but the frivolous slippers and the beruffled petticoat, which she had not yet advanced to, were still displayed by her side, and were duly admired by her guests.

"Isn't your mother splendid to give you such wonderful presents?" sighed Nancy Lee enviously. She had lost her heart to the slipper heels.

"I'll bet she's fun to have around when you're sick," put in Jane.

"Oh, yes," agreed Nancy Lester politely. "She has entertained me beautifully, and the clothes she has bought me are beyond my wildest dreams. Every one has been so good to me. I asked Miss Willis—that's my nurse—to telephone all of you my thanks for the flowers. And Mary Ann has not objected to anything—not even to toasting crumpets. It's wonderful."

Nancy Lee, her mind hard at work on the problem that Mrs. Lester had set them, wondered whether her namesake really looked different or whether it was only her imagination. She seemed smaller, naturally, lying back among so many pillows, and paler and thinner; but there was something else. Half listening to what the others were saying, Nancy kept on trying to analyze the difference. And at last she hit it; Nancy Lester did not smile any more. Generally, in the old days, her smile had been rather faint and flickering, but all the same it had lighted her face wonderfully; now it was gone. She was enthusiastic, in words, over her mother's devotion, her new clothes, and her flowers; she was delighted to see

her two friends again. That is, she said she was delighted, but she had not looked really delighted; she had not smiled once. And that was what made her look so different.

Having settled this matter to her satisfaction, Nancy Lee could give her whole attention to the conversation. Jane was telling Nancy Lester about the horrible History quiz they had had that morning.

"Would you have thought it of Miss Dutton?" sighed Jane. "A person never can think straight on the first day of school. Vacation came just right for you, didn't it, Noticing Nancy? You live at home, so the week's leisure wouldn't have meant much to you, and you'll miss very few lessons."

"I'm afraid I shall miss a lot, Jane," said Nancy Lester apathetically. "I can't go back for a long time yet."

Jane grinned. "I forgot. You hate school, and you're going to get out of all you can."

"Oh, it isn't that." There was such a tragic look on Nancy Lester's face as she spoke that Nancy Lee, sure she had discovered the hidden worry that Mrs. Lester wanted to know about, leaned forward impulsively and put her arms around her little namesake.

"Nancy Lester," she began with mock severity,

"you must not think things like that. Just because—Grace didn't come back, you mustn't worry, thinking that you won't. Your mother told us that the doctor isn't worried—not a bit worried—about you. You were run down, and that's why it takes time for you to pull up again."

"Oh, I should think it did take time," wailed Nancy Lester. "That's what I meant, not, as you thought, that I'd never get well. The doctor told me the very first day, when I asked how long it would be before I could go ahead and see to everything, as I always have,—he told me it would be months. Months!" repeated Nancy Lester despairingly. "And all the time there are things I could be seeing to, and there's my mother with no one to look after her, and mend her up and cheer her up, and pour her coffee and—and —— She's trying to look after me, poor thing!" In her excitement Nancy Lester sat up straight on her couch. "I told you about my job." She spoke now to Nancy. "Well, I've lost it—lost it for months and months. All my dear bothers have been taken away. I'm no use at all. I'm nobody. I loved to be needed and to be 'a person by myself,' the way Jane said I was. I'm not like other girls—my mother is forever telling me that. I've never had the things other girls have, nor done the things they do. But I had my job. And now

I—haven't—anything. And months make years, and I just can't stand it!" With a little shivering sigh Nancy Lester put her head down on the white arm of the wicker couch and hid her grief there.

Jane and Nancy exchanged pitying glances. So that was the trouble that was keeping Nancy Lester from getting well. Jane's head-shake and little shrug meant that Nancy, not she, knew all about the mysterious job that Noticing Nancy said she had lost, and, accordingly, that Nancy, and not Jane, must say something consoling; while Nancy's answering head-shake meant that she didn't know *what* to say or to do. But when you must, you must.

"Nancy Namesake," Nancy Lee ordered again with severity, "stop feeling bad about things you can't help. Stop this minute, and lie back on your lovely couch, wearing your scrumptious new kimono, and listen to me. You've got a job—a perfectly good new job. It's to get well and strong again."

"That's not a job, Nancy dear," came in muffled tones from the couch arm. "It's just what Lloyd calls a 'waiting game.' Oh, but it's not anything so nice as a game! It's just *waiting*. There's nothing you can do, and oh, how I hate it!"

"That's no way to feel." Jane came gallantly to Nancy's assistance. "Anything is a game if

you play it right, Noticing Nancy. And there's plenty you can do; you can help a lot about getting well. You can coöperate like hot cakes with the doctor and the nurse and your mother. Nancy and I will coöperate too."

"How?" demanded Nancy Lee with tactless eagerness.

"Don't know yet," Jane retorted hastily. "But we'll find ways. Only—it seems as if I could cooperate lots better if I knew something about this job that Noticing Nancy's lost."

"Tell her, please, Nancy dear," came in a broken little wail from the couch-arm.

"W-e-ll, let me see," began Nancy Lee slowly. It wasn't necessary to explain how Nancy Lester got her job; only what it was. Boiled down thus to lowest terms and told in Nancy Lee's plain, prosaic fashion, the story lost all the pathos which had so impressed Nancy Lee when she first heard it. But Jane, knowing what she did about Mrs. Lester and Nancy's habit of "noticing" and all, could easily read between the lines and understand.

"Great hat!" she exclaimed with a fine show of exasperation. "Great bonnet! Yes, that's slang, but the situation calls for it. I suppose you think this regular job of yours is a game, Noticing Nancy Lester. I suppose you think it's all kinds of fun

to drudge around all day and tire yourself out for other people. You call that the jolliest game in the world. But you can't see the least bit of fun in lying still for once and letting other people do a few things for you. Flowers galore and new clothes and select callers and no school to bother with aren't any fun—not a scrap of fun. I didn't think you were so stupid, Noticing Nancy Lester."

Unexpectedly, at that, Nancy Lester lifted her head and lay back wearily among her pillows.

"Of course I'm stupid, Jane," she announced calmly. "I'm just plain and slow and useful, not anything more. So, when I can't be useful, I'm just nothing at all."

"You're not plain and stupid," Nancy Lee denied indignantly. "And if you want to be useful, I know something you can do, right now, in bed. You can knit socks for Jeanne's brothers We're all working on socks now, since war was declared, because of course we want to help, and socks are most needed, so Jeanne's brothers write. And if any girl is ready for bed a few minutes before the 'lights out' bell, she knits in bed, like mad. So you can do that right now, and it won't interfere at all with your principal job—your perfectly good new job of getting well."

"I shall like to knit the socks," said Nancy Lester unsmilingly. "Will you bring me the

directions and explain to Miss Willis about the needles and the wool?"

"Of course," Nancy Lee promised. "And now we ought to go, before you are too tired. But first tell us that you're going to be happy and to try,—really try,—by being happy and not worrying, to get well."

"I will try hard, dear Nancy," Nancy Lester answered wearily. "But it doesn't seem as if I could feel happy, unless ——" Her lip quivered dangerously.

"Oh, yes, you can," Jane broke the pause. "You've just got to see how to do it, that's all. If people can be happy in all sorts of miserable hovels, when they're sick and hungry and ill-treated, you can be happy here—if you only see it so." Jane paused for an inspiration. "Can't you call this your vacation job?" she suggested finally. "Everybody takes vacations. If you never have, it's high time you began. I've heard my father say that it's false economy to get along without them."

"I'll try to be happy that way, Jane," said Nancy Lester solemnly.

It worried Nancy Lee to have her so solemn; Nancy Lester's smile was a part of her somehow, and Nancy Lee felt that there would be no assurance that she had stopped worrying until she

smiled. Jane rose to go, feeling, apparently, that what they came to do was done. Nancy got up, too, hesitated, and sat down again on the wide arm of Nancy Lester's couch.

"Wait a minute, Jane," she ordered. "I've thought of something—or maybe I have. Nancy Namesake, could you be any happier about it this way? Turn and turn about is fair play, isn't it? Well, you've always been Noticing Nancy, and you've liked it. Now's your turn to be Noticed Nancy for once. Don't you think you ought to be happy about taking a turn at that?"

"Great hat!" broke in Jane excitedly. "Of course she ought. Why, think of the possibilities, Nancy Namesake! Think what a fearful lot you can learn now about how to notice. You can make yourself an expert in what to do for people when they're down, and what not to do. Why, when you get back to your regular job of noticing, you'll be a perfect wonder at it, Noticing Nancy."

Nancy Lester looked intently from one friend to the other. "There's something in that, Jane and Nancy," she said. Suddenly she smiled, and practical Nancy Lee noted with relief that it was, for Nancy Lester, an extremely gay, extremely lasting smile.

"I do honestly think that it will be fun to do it this way," she said. "I will try it, and I will re-

member all that I observe about the right way to 'notice,' and I will tell you all about it when you come again. You must coöperate by coming very soon again, Jane and Nancy."

Down-stairs Pauline, the pretty new parlor maid, told the girls that Mrs. Lester was lying down.

"She gets so tired trying to cheer up poor Miss Annetta," explained Pauline sympathetically.

"Don't call her," said Nancy Lee. "Just tell her, when she comes down, that we've done what she wanted, and that it was really nothing important that was worrying Miss Annetta. Tell her it's all arranged."

"Yes, miss. Can I help you on with your wraps?" asked Pauline, and upon being told that the girls needed no help she disappeared.

"They must have plenty of money," Nancy whispered to Jane. "They must live in a little old house with one maid because they want to, and Nancy's plain dresses must be her choice."

"Joke on us, trying to pay that livery bill," laughed Jane.

The front door opened, and a man came in—a very thin, very pale, but very handsome young man. He dropped his hat and coat hastily on a hall chair, and hurried on, as if he was perfectly at home in the house. Confronting Jane and Nancy, he stopped dead.

"Oh!" cried Nancy, startled at the intruder's precipitate approach.

"Good-afternoon," gasped Jane, bound to appear calm and collected, as befitted Jane A. A.

"Good-afternoon." The strange man greeted them both in friendly fashion, then looked around the room inquiringly. "Is Mrs. Lester about—or Miss Lester?" he asked.

"Why, you are the one she calls Mr. Bob!" cried Nancy Lee, suddenly enlightened. "You are home from 'somewhere in France.' Nancy Lester will be so glad!"

"And you are two of those jolly Fair Oaks girls that she's written me about," returned Mr. Bob competently. "Were you all just going out together?"

The girls explained, while Mr. Bob's handsome face grew sober.

"We hope she'll get well faster now," Nancy Lee added, as a cheering afterthought. "She's going to try to—to try not to worry about things, I mean, because that keeps her back."

"I expect you can amuse her wonderfully," put in Jane, "with your stories of battles and air-raids and things of that sort."

Mr. Bob smiled. "'Battles and air-raids and things of that sort' don't strike me as exactly amusing. But I'll do my best. You may count

on me to do anything I can that's for Annetta's interest. I'm even going to wait here, instead of rushing up to her two steps at a time, as I want to, for fear her nurse may think she's seen people enough for to-day."

Mrs. Lester, coming down a little later, found the girls gone and Mr. Bob pacing restlessly up and down her sitting-room.

"Back to enlist under the only colors?" he repeated her query. "Well, there are a few things to be seen to first, I'm afraid. I've been in hospital lately, you know. They advised me to come home and see my own oculist, who knows my eyes. Serene Highness, tell me more about Annetta. When can I see the child?"

"Now," decreed Mrs. Lester indulgently. "She's not too tired, I'm sure. Those girls didn't stay long, and they've settled all her troubles, so Pauline was commissioned to tell me. Don't let her know if you think she looks ill. Tell her she doesn't."

"Serene Highness," said Mr. Bob gently, "I may as well tell you first as last, that I probably shouldn't notice any little detail like that. One of my eyes is gone—paralysis of the nerve, they call it. And the other—well, I'm glad that I may see Annetta to-day, Serene Highness, because I may not be able to see her in the same sense to-

morrow. And I've been thinking of her and longing for her—and for you—all the long way home from France. We may tell her that much, but not the rest, Serene Highness."

CHAPTER XV

ANNETTA OR NANCY?

"SHALL I call you Annetta or Nancy, dear child?" It was Mr. Bob, sitting, as he had sat most of the time since his return, close by Nancy Lester's couch. Generally he had one hand on her arm, resting there as if in loving protection, while the other shaded his aching eyes. There had been no change for better or worse in his dimmed sight since he got back. But in Nancy Lester there had been a great change for the better.

"When you lie still and don't bother or think or try, things just come to you," she told the doctor. "But if you try, you get tired and then everything goes wrong. Sick people are like little children, aren't they? They just can't be hurried."

The doctor laughed. "You've hit it. Like little children, too, they need long naps. Turn all your numerous nurses out of here whenever you feel a bit drowsy, and go to sleep."

"They are not all nurses," Nancy Lester informed him precisely. "They do not keep charts or carry out doctor's orders. My mother enter-

tains me, which Miss Willis, poor thing, is certainly very poor at. The others just—coöperate."

"To what end?" inquired the doctor curiously. He was learning a great deal that interested him from the Lesters.

"Why, to the end of helping me to get well, of course," Nancy Lester explained, a trifle impatiently. "First they showed me how silly it was to worry myself into staying sick. Then they started me on army socks. And when I'm well enough, they're going to teach me about outdoor sports, because you say they will help me to be strong and well, and I've never done anything of the sort before."

"And how about Mr. Bob, as you call him?" twinkled the doctor. "What does he do?"

"It makes me happy and contented to be with him, just as it always has," said Nancy Lester quietly. "But somehow I don't think he is very happy himself. Have you noticed that? I can't see why, after all the splendid things he's done in France, and all that he will do soon again, under our own colors."

"He's possibly not feeling quite fit since his hospital experience," suggested the doctor, who knew nothing about Mr. Bob's eyes.

"He won't talk at all about that," said Nancy Lester sadly. "He's always told me all his

worries before, but now he just insists that he's 'quite all right' and changes the subject. I could be very unhappy about his treating me like that, if I let myself. But of course I mustn't do it, or I shan't get well so fast."

Because she suspected that he was troubled about something, Nancy Lester took care to show only her gayest, serenest self to Mr. Bob, while he, for his part, was firmly resolved to let no hint of impending tragedy mar Nancy Lester's convalescence. Twice he went to New York to see his oculist, glossing over his errand vaguely as "business"; and he easily explained his delay about reënlisting on the same grounds. So, lightly skimming the surface of Mr. Bob's affairs, they talked a great deal about Nancy's: about her beloved school, Miss Dutton's delightful History classes, the friends she had made, Timmy and the war-babies, and all Jane's amusing ideas and theories, coöperation among them.

And so Mr. Bob knew how, at school, Annetta had turned Nancy, and that was why he happened to ask her which name she preferred him to use. She smiled at him roguishly.

"Call me Nancy, please, till I'm well. Nancy's frivolous and petted and lazy and spoiled. People are forever giving her things and doing things for her, while she lies on a couch and enjoys it. I'm

being Nancy just till I get all rested up and quite strong again. After that"—Nancy Lester waved her arms in a gesture that took in the whole glorious world—"after that, I have a feeling that I'm going to do something wonderful. Is it conceited and horrid, dear Mr. Bob, to want to be wonderful?"

He smiled at her enthusiasm. "Not a bit. It merely means that you are getting well, and that being Nancy—frivolous, petted, lazy, fascinating Nancy—agrees with you. I'm glad you had the chance."

"So am I—now," confessed Nancy Lester. "At first I felt dreadfully. I worried so about Mother and the house and ——"

"And all the lost kittens and starved children and ill-treated horses and lonely old ladies for miles around," laughed Mr. Bob. "I know Annetta's habits, you see. But Her Serene Highness and the house have survived, and probably all the poor folk that you like to bother with have also. Nobody is indispensable." He gave a tired sigh, then instantly brightened. "As for you, dear child, you are not going to be wonderful, for you have become so already."

"What—what do you mean?" asked Nancy Lester amazedly. "I wrote you that I hoped to learn so much about writing this year, but almost before I had begun I had to stop. You haven't

forgotten, Mr. Bob, that writing is the thing we picked out for me to do?"

He laughed again. "Of course I haven't forgotten, my dear. But to write wonderfully one must be wonderful, and while I've always considered you that, as Annetta-Nancy you are far more so. You are more impressive somehow in these fluffy clothes and with the becoming, rested look on your face. Surely it's not for me to tell so wise a little person as Annetta used to be that clothes help make the woman wonderful."

Nancy Lester, tremendously interested in all that he was saying, was watching his face intently. "I wish you looked more rested, dear Mr. Bob," she said. "Seems as if you ought to by this time. Don't you need to be out-of-doors more? From now on, you know, I'm to live out-of-doors. The doctor says it's the only place for convalescents, and you are a convalescent too, dear Mr. Bob."

"No, I'm a ——" he began recklessly, and paused, horrified, on the brink of the disclosure. "I'm quite well," he went on hastily, "but I suppose all this lying about is getting on my nerves. I—I shall have to be away a great deal from now on, making—arrangements."

"Arrangements for going back to that awful battle-line?" asked the girl.

"For my battle-line," he corroborated promptly.

"Don't look so solemn, child. You really don't need me, with all these jolly girls who are ready to play about with you—not to mention Her Serene Highness. And as for battle-lines, life is made up of battle-lines, and only one of them is in France. Driving an ambulance after Mons was probably paradise, compared to some of the jobs I shall tackle in my time."

"You poor dear!" sighed Nancy Lester sympathetically. "I suppose men do have hard times ——"

"They never want to be pitied for that, I think," broke in Mr. Bob in a queer, strained voice. He jumped up hurriedly. "I believe you're right, Nancy. I need air to tone me up. I'm off for a tramp."

Before Nancy Lester could answer, he had gone. Puzzled by his manner, she lay back, looking after him and thinking him over, the army socks forgotten in her lap.

"I suppose it's the awful things he saw in France that make him so nervous and jumpy," she decided finally. "If there's anything else, why doesn't he tell me? He always used to tell me things. Mother might know."

But Mrs. Lester, being interrogated, replied hastily that Annetta, not she, had always been in Mr. Bob's intimate confidence.

"It's you everybody tells things to," she announced with finality, and changed the subject.

And that afternoon, when Mr. Bob ran in to tell the Lesters that "business" was unexpectedly taking him off for a few days, Nancy had no chance to question him pointblank, as she had intended, because she was obliged to divide her attention between him and another caller: Phyllis Knight.

It was Jane's idea to have Phyllis go to see Nancy Lester; but it was Lloyd Mallory who had discovered the date of Nancy Lester's birthday, and it was one of the Mabels who had suggested the idea of the birthday party which Phyllis Knight carried in a big bandbox, with bunches of pink roses all over it and a huge pink tulle bow on top. Phyllis's manner did not match either the gaiety of the roses or the saucy piquancy of the big bow. She had never in her life been so angry as when Miss Marshall, fresh from a long interview with Jane Learned, had summoned Phyllis to her presence and told her curtly that, as secretary of the senior class, she was the proper person to take the seniors' birthday present to Nancy Lester.

"Furthermore, I expect you to perform the duty in a manner that would please your classmates, and to report in due form upon your call at the next class meeting." Miss Marshall paused there,

looked sharply at Phyllis, and gave her characteristic quick head-shake. "And—try to enjoy going, Phyllis," she advised, dropping into a kindlier, more intimate tone. "There's no use in always kicking against the pricks, my dear girl. I wanted your year here to be pleasant; please believe that I've done all I could to make it so."

Phyllis shrugged. "I detest all boarding-schools," she said insolently. "But do you call it making things pleasant when you force me to play errand-girl and carry a band-box through the streets?"

For a moment Miss Marshall was inclined to treat such rudeness as it deserved; but her sense of humor and a recollection of the strange story that Jane Learned had told her, together with her confidence that Jane was right about what Nancy Lester could do to help Phyllis, brought her to a pause. What she finally did was to laugh. "Don't be so absurd, Phyllis," she said. "Run along now, or you will miss seeing the wonderful box filled."

And Phyllis, who had quailed before Miss Marshall's first stern look and been thrown into a raging passion by her laugh, "ran along," but not to see Nancy Lester's birthday Wonder Box filled to overflowing with remembrances from her classmates—dainty trifles, absurd, amusing toys, an original birthday verse by Jane, and a Wishing

Ring, with an explanatory note signed by Jane, Christina, Lloyd, and Nancy Lee. Miss Marshall could insist that Phyllis, senior secretary, carry the box to its destination; but she could not make her take any further interest in the hateful thing, so Phyllis decided angrily.

The complete history of Phyllis's forced visit to the little house dated from an afternoon early in Nancy Lester's convalescence, when the doctor, meeting Jane Learned in the Lesters' hall, demanded of her abruptly: "Is your schoolmate, Phyllis Knight, a truthful person?"

The spy-rumor, with which he had once tried, with no definite result, to confront Mrs. Lester, had come to him from a Fair Oaks day-pupil, who lived next door to him. As his liking for and confidence in Mrs. Lester grew, he had tried in other ways to run the story down, and had finally traced it to Phyllis.

"That's a queer question, Miss Jane," he added in explanation of his query, "but I happen to need the answer, and I had a hunch, as the boys say, that you'd know it."

For a moment Jane hesitated. "I don't see what right I have ——" she began at last, and stopped because she had remembered that the Fair Oaks girl who lived next to the doctor was one of Phyllis's few friends. With characteristic

acumen she put two and two together and got the right answer. "No," she told the doctor calmly, "Phyllis isn't truthful. Or at least she isn't honest. You've heard that spy-story? I was sure you had. Well, it's not so, I'm sure; but I can't prove that it isn't. I can prove my statement about Phyllis's character, all right, but I'd rather you took my word for it."

The doctor nodded brusquely, and swept on to the main issue. "That story ought to be cleared up. It's unpleasant. Can't you force Miss Knight to deny it?"

Jane grinned. "So far I haven't forced Phyllis to do anything much that she didn't want to. She's mean, but she's awfully bright. She gets the best of it every time."

"Has she any reason for particularly disliking the Lesters?"

"She particularly dislikes everybody," said Jane, "except my twin sister Christina, and sometimes I think that deep down inside she even dislikes Christina."

"Perhaps your sister can suggest some way of getting at this matter," suggested the doctor. "Mrs. Lester is a charming woman, in spite of her oddities, and little Miss Lester—I really can't imagine any one wanting to prejudice the town against them."

"Is there really enough feeling to matter?" asked Jane.

For answer the doctor led her to the front door and opened it. "See that indolent gardener over there?" He pointed to a man leisurely clipping the hedge opposite. "He's watching this house. If Mrs. Lester happens to want to leave town, he'd leave too—or there might be open trouble. Young Endicott is being watched too. Another of those night-hawk parties up from New York would result in a round of arrests."

Jane's face was a study. "Why, it's—dead earnest, isn't it?" she gasped. "People—grown-up people—really believe it all. It's—it's ——"

"It's war," the doctor put the matter for her. "Now suppose, Miss Jane, that you try to arrange this affair quietly. I quite agree with you that all the trouble has come from somebody's mistake—or somebody's malice. If you fail, I believe I shall take a hand—try my luck at putting Miss Knight through the third degree."

Jane almost ran back to Fair Oaks, gathered the rest of the Triangle, and excitedly recounted her interview with Nancy Lester's doctor.

"Now, Christina," she concluded, "you know Phyllis best. What do you think?"

"Oh, Jane, I wish I'd never seen that girl!"

declared little Christina tearfully. "I suppose she's just as mean and horrid as you two say. But she isn't so in some ways. For instance, she's always sweet and dear to children and old people. I've noticed that in stores, and when we've been out walking. I think, if she were to see Nancy Lester while she's sick, she'd be sweet to her too. And Nancy Lester is such a dear that maybe Phyllis would like her enough, on top of being sorry for her, to tell the tru—explain," amended Christina loyally, "about that letter." Little Christina sighed deeply. "Phyllis is awfully stubborn, but if you once get her headed right, she's splendid. So we'd better try to get her headed right, and our troubles will then be over," ended Christina quaintly.

"Yes, but *how* can we get her headed?" demanded practical Nancy Lee.

The seniors' birthday party for Nancy Lester had been planned the night before, and Nancy, Jane, and the Mabel whose idea it had been, delegated to carry it to her. So it was easy enough for Jane, of the put-two-and-two-together mind, to see what could be done about heading Phyllis in the direction of Nancy Lester. And when Phyllis, notified by Nancy Lee, who was class president, of the change of plans, coolly refused to be so headed, Jane went straight to Miss Marshall with the

whole story of Phyllis's career at Fair Oaks, skiing episode included.

And so it was that Phyllis Knight, black as a thunder-cloud, sullen as a lowering August day, but not quite daring to be openly disagreeable, was ushered into Mrs. Lester's dainty, flower-decked bedroom, where Nancy Lester was spending the afternoon, just in time to spoil her hostess's confidential chat with Mr. Bob.

Nancy Lester's eyes shone as she greeted her caller. "You expect your very best friends to bother," she explained, "but when the ones that you haven't known so well bother, then you're perfectly delighted. I do love surprises!"

"Your birthday is to-morrow, so we have heard," began Phyllis stiffly. "This box is a sort of birthday party for you from the Fair Oaks seniors—all but myself. I am the class secretary, therefore Miss Marshall told me to bring it here. We—they wish you a happy birthday and hope you will like the Wonder Box." Phyllis dropped the box with a thud by Nancy Lester's side and turned away, pleasantly conscious that if Nancy Lester did not notice her insolent denial of having had any but a compulsory part in the class gift, it would be because Nancy Lester was stupid.

But before Phyllis could move away, Nancy

Lester had stretched out eager hands to her. "Oh, Phyllis!" she said in her low, sweet, thrilling voice. "Oh, Phyllis, how did they know?"

"I'm sure I can't tell you," said Phyllis sullenly.

"They found out about my birthday and they guessed that I love fluffy, frilly things, for all I look so plain, and everybody did something about it. Oh, Phyllis, do I have to wait till my birthday —till to-morrow, to look inside?"

"I don't know," said Phyllis curtly, wishing that she had the determination to wrench those clinging hands loose and go away.

"Oh, then they didn't make rules about it!" cried Nancy Lester jubilantly. "Then I can untie the wonderful bow this minute, take off the wonderful cover, and look at the wonders beneath. Do you hear that, Mr. Bob? Phyllis Knight, this is Mr. Robert Endicott. He adores surprises and mysteries and all the other silly things—Mother calls them silly—that I do. He's going away to-night, so it's just the last touch of loveliness for us three to open the box now. That will be your and his and my birthday party, and to-morrow I can do it all over again with Mother. Mother isn't the kind to mind if I've seen all the things before."

"I can't stay," curtly, from Phyllis.

"Oh, please, please do!" begged Nancy Lester.

"Is it one of their sacred rules that will be broken, or one of their sacred study-hours that will be misspent, if you stay? I'm sure they'd let you if they knew how frightfully much I want you to."

"Oh, do stay, Miss Knight," coaxed Mr. Bob. "Two may be company, but they're not a party, you know. Won't the senders and contrivers of this box of marvels like to know how the party went off?"

"If you wish it, I'll stay," said Phyllis, looking straight at Mr. Bob, and happy again because she had risked another piece of rudeness.

"Oh, thank you so much!" cried Nancy Lester delightedly. "Mr. Bob, would you ask Marie Antoinette to bring us tea? Crumpets, if you can get them out of her, and milk for me. I've gone back to my childhood," she explained to Phyllis, "to naps and milk and being taken care of."

Phyllis nodded interestedly. "It's made you look like a child: happy and rested and ready to take an interest in every little thing that comes along."

"Oh, Phyllis, don't you love children's eyes?" cried Nancy Lester. "They are always so eager and expectant."

"And so loving," said Phyllis Knight. "And I like to feel their little clinging arms." She looked at Nancy Lester's small white hands.

They were strong, capable hands, but they had just clung to her in a very childlike way.

"She'll give us the crumpets," shouted Mr. Bob, coming up the stairs two at a time. "She realizes that she must rise to an occasion like this."

"Dear old Marie Antoinette!" laughed Nancy Lester. "Could I have a chair close up to me for the Wonder Box, please, Mr. Bob?" She turned to Phyllis. "Have you seen all the things that are inside?"

"No," said Phyllis, "not any. I—I ——"

"It was dear of you to do your part by bringing it to me," Nancy Lester put in hastily. "And isn't it splendid that all of us are going to be equally surprised and thrilled and amused by our party?"

"Remember it's your party, dear child," said Mr. Bob smilingly, "and your box."

She lifted her eyes to him serenely. "When I was a little girl," she explained, "my darling father once said to me: 'You have too many things for one child.' So of course after that I tried to share my things, and that"—she turned suddenly to Phyllis—"is a thing little children hate to do. They are so comical, always wanting their own toys. They don't realize that it's more fun—oh, heaps and heaps more!—to share. I'd really rather call it our party, Mr. Bob, and certainly it

wouldn't be much of a party if I had it all alone. But as it's my birthday, I'm going to open the first present myself."

The first present was a striped candy cane, which had been carefully laid on top of the pile to avoid breakages. When Nancy Lester invited Phyllis to draw next, she made no objection. She drew out some knitting-needle holders that looked exactly like two empty cartridges, fastened together patriotically with red, white, and blue ribbons. Then Mr. Bob "pulled out a plum," and he got the Wishing Ring.

"Dear Maire-Bruin-Nancy," he read. "This is the Wishing Ring that Cinderella's fairy godmother used. Write your dearest wish (the one you have had for years—and it looks like Christina Learned) on the enclosed Magic Square of paper. Fold it as small as a butterfly's wing, thrust it through the Wishing Ring, send by trusty messenger to the Fairy Godmothers' Association, care J. and C. Learned, Lloyd Mallory, and Nancy Lee, and if all the fays in fairyland can do the deed, your wish shall come true. (Signed) Fairy Godmothers."

Nancy Lester listened, a child's rapture in her eyes, while Mr. Bob read the fairy godmothers' letter. "Isn't that sweet of them?" she cried as he paused. "However did they know, Mr. Bob,

that I've always wished I'd had a real godmother, because maybe she would turn out to be the fairy-like kind? And however did they happen to remember that silly old wish of mine?" She turned to Phyllis. "Do you know anything about this?"

Phyllis shook her head. "I remembered about the wish, because you said it looked like Christina." And then being a very hard-headed, unfairy-like person, she added, "Is it something those three can do for you or get for you?"

"Why, of course it is!" Nancy Lester smiled at her serenely. "That's the most fascinating part of it. But maybe I oughtn't to bother them." She turned quickly toward Mr. Bob for advice, and surprised the saddest, weariest look on his face. "You are hungry for your tea," she said. "Will you tell Marie Antoinette to bring it now?"

But Mr. Bob could not stay for tea, it seemed; he had stayed too long already. When he had left, all smiles and gaiety, Nancy Lester leaned back among the pillows, regardless of Phyllis and the Wonder Box, to puzzle over his depression. As she lay still, she mechanically patted the lace on her sleeve. Suddenly she glanced down at the lace, the clustered chiffon roses, the pale pink of the silken negligee, with a hint of the petticoat showing beneath. She looked at her high-heeled

slippers; then she lifted her hand to her hair, which Mrs. Lester had arranged in becoming ripply waves around her face and a great loose knot behind. She smiled to herself, nodded once vigorously, and with a little sigh of relief turned to Phyllis.

"We haven't made much progress with the party. You draw something. In a moment my mother will come, I think, after she has said good-bye to Mr. Bob. And she will send for the tea and while you two are having yours, I shall have time, between sips of milk, to write to my god-mothers, using the Magic Square for the purpose. And perhaps you will be my Trusty Messenger."

Phyllis's next parcel was a filmy handkerchief. Then Nancy opened an awkwardly wrapped bundle, which proved to be a tiny rose-tree, not four inches high, but blooming gaily. After that Mrs. Lester came in and there was tea, more bundles were opened, and the godmothers' note written, duly folded, and put into the Wishing Ring. And at that point in the festivities Miss Willis appeared.

"You're wearing your most dragon-like expression," Mrs. Lester informed her gaily. "What's the matter?"

"Miss Lester didn't sleep well last night," said Miss Willis. "And callers are not supposed to

stay so long. It's all too exciting for the late afternoon." Her disapproving gaze swept from the absurd little rose-tree and the candy-cane to the disorderly array of tulle and wrapping-paper that littered the floor.

"We are turned out," Mrs. Lester twinkled at Phyllis Knight. "We will make the inhospitable dragon help carry our tea down-stairs, and there we will dally over it as long as we please. Are you really tired, Annetta-Nancy?"

"No," Nancy Lester denied indignantly, then smiled at Miss Willis. "But I suppose my good dragon is right. You see, Phyllis, it's my job now to get well fast, and you mustn't excite babies —or sick persons—just before bedtime. I do thank you for coming, and please tell them all how I love my box, so that they'll really understand. And will you come again some day?"

"If you want me, I'd love to," said Phyllis Knight, with an appealing gentleness in her voice that would have astonished Fair Oaks and Miss Marshall.

Christina had been right in saying that if you could only get Phyllis headed right, she would go on of herself. As soon as study-hour was over that evening, she sought out Christina and made a curt, downright confession.

"That letter, you know," she began abruptly.

"I got a man I know in New York to write it, and then I dropped it in the hall myself. Mrs. Lester's French friend, Monsieur Capel, who writes her every day on paper like what I used, is something at the French consulate in New York. It was he who raided my father's offices and had him deported. That was last winter. My father came back and he is in prison now at Fort Leavenworth for trying to blow up a munition factory. You must have seen it in the papers; indeed I heard some of the girls talking about it. But you wouldn't know it was my father because his name is Max Koch. He told me to change mine to Knight. He didn't know about the letter. I hoped it would get Monsieur Capel into trouble, and then I'd write my father and he'd be pleased. My mother is dead. When your mother is dead, and your father is in prison for murdering a lot of helpless women—the factory was full of women at the time, and the reason only ten were killed was because the fuse was defective—why, you don't much care what happens to you. When I was four years old, my father had to leave Germany because he had taken his bank's money. My mother used to sit and cry all day, and before she died she told me why. Now that Nancy Lester is sick, I don't want her and her mother bothered. Because I'm miserable and never make friends, I

don't want her to be that way. Will you tell the girls? I wrote my father's lawyer that I wished to leave here and go to work, and to-night he's sent for me. I'm going to-morrow, but don't tell the others that, Christina. I want to slip away without any good-byes. After this I'm going to be square and honest—and look out for chances to be kind, like Nancy Lester."

That was the end of Phyllis Knight at Fair Oaks.

CHAPTER XVI

MORE INTERESTING DISCOVERIES

Mr. Bob was gone only two days.

"I know I ought to keep away, Shirley," he told Mrs. Lester. "I'm making you unhappy, and I'm sure that dear child up-stairs guesses that something is wrong and worries about it. But I love this little house best of any place in the whole wide world, and before the long, long dark I want to feast my eyes on it and you and Annetta."

"You mustn't be so despondent, Bob." It was Mrs. Lester's comfortable habit never to believe any disagreeable thing until it was fairly forced upon her. "You won't go blind. You couldn't. It's too terrible."

"The fact that a thing is terrible, Shirley, doesn't seem, nowadays, to be any reason for its not happening," he told her with a wry smile.

"Well, anyway,"—Mrs. Lester turned to a pleasanter phase of the subject,—"Annetta adores having you here, and she hasn't noticed that anything's wrong; of that I'm sure. She's as gay as a lark, especially since her birthday."

Which was true, but the reason for Nancy Lester's light-heartedness was the fact that she had at last devised a plan for winning Mr. Bob's confidence. She had thought it out the day that Phyllis brought the birthday box, and on the day of Mrs. Lester's and Mr. Bob's conversation she saw her chance to execute it. Mrs. Lester was painting again, with a fervor due to her long rest; and she had announced her intention of working all the afternoon. Miss Willis would be out after three. Nancy Lester wrote a little note to Mr. Bob and dispatched it by Miss Willis, inviting him to come to see her exactly at half-past three. She signed it "Annetta," and when Mr. Bob arrived just on the hour, it was Annetta he found waiting for him: a plain little girl, with an eager, earnest little face. Her hair was pulled straight back and twisted up in the old, quick, unbecoming way, and she wore a dark serge dress with three hooks in front and only a crisp white collar to relieve its plainness.

"How do you do?" said plain, useful Annetta, demurely.

Mr. Bob stood beside her, blinking down at her intently. He passed a hand over her smooth hair and then down her serge sleeve. "Why, it's Annetta back again," he said. "How's that?"

"Nancy's feelings were hurt," explained Nancy

Lester. "She didn't like the way you treated her, so she's gone away for a while."

Mr. Bob frowned in perplexity. "These pretty furbelowed women are so difficult to please, Annetta," he told her solemnly. "Will you convey my apologies to pretty Miss Nancy and ask her to come back soon?"

"Do you like her better than Annetta?" asked Nancy Lester.

Mr. Bob considered. "You simply can't compare the two. Annetta is sweet and comfortable and considerate. One tells one's troubles to Annetta ——"

"Then why *don't* you tell them?" demanded Nancy Lester eagerly. "There's something terrible the matter. Oh, don't say there isn't! I've known it for weeks, dear, and I've been so hurt and unhappy that you wouldn't tell me. It helps to tell! It does—yes, even just the telling helps, and there might be something I could do. I've fought against being unhappy because I didn't know, and against worrying; but if you don't tell me soon, dear Mr. Bob, I can't fight any longer. And neither, dear, can you," she concluded, patting his shaking hand lovingly.

Five minutes later Noticing Nancy Lester knew exactly why Mr. Bob had acquired the habit of resting his hand on her arm. She, too, was seeing

the world with a film before her eyes, though hers was a film of sympathetic tears.

"It has helped to tell you, dear," said Mr. Bob. "No, there's nothing any one can do. It's quite, quite hopeless, my doctor tells me."

"I shall always be around to hold your hand, Mr. Bob," said Nancy Lester. "You shall never be alone in the great dark."

"How you always manage to understand, Annetta!" sighed Mr. Bob gratefully.

There was a long silence. "Does Mother know?" asked the girl finally, and when he said yes, a shocked look spread over her transparent face, which it was fortunate Mr. Bob could not see. How could any one who loved Mr. Bob, she wondered, be as gay and happy as Mother had been, knowing this? But presently the heavy silence brought it home to her that she, too, must appear gay and happy—for Mr. Bob's sake. She must talk to divert his mind. She must laugh, because otherwise he would have a new trouble to bear—the thought that he had saddened a dear friend.

"I must tell you about the godmothers and my dearest wish," she began bravely. "It's to come true next Wednesday evening. It was a party that I've always wished for, you see—a dancing party, with music behind palms, and nice

young men to dance with. Other girls are always telling about the fun they have at parties."

"And the godmothers are giving you your first party?" asked Mr. Bob, grateful for the digression.

"Yes," she told him. "It all arranged itself in the most fairylike way. The seniors had wanted to have a dance, you see. Jane Learned put the idea into their heads. All those that have fiancés are to invite them, and so in after-years they will feel better acquainted with their old school friends. Jane said they could put a note at the bottom of the wedding-cards: 'You met him at our senior dance;' or, 'I broke my engagement to the man I asked to our school dance. This is another, much nicer man.' Isn't Jane comical?"

"Very comical," agreed Mr. Bob, trying to enter into her pleasure. "Do most of the Fair Oaks seniors possess fiancés, Annetta?"

"Oh, no," she laughed. "There's only one, I think. That's one reason why Jane's idea is so absurd. I wish I'd known that you were coming back so soon. You said a week when you went away, and so, when Nancy Lee asked if she might invite a nice boy named Peter Little to take me to my dance, I said yes."

"I meant to stay away from you a month, dear," he told her. "But I couldn't. I——"

He jumped up and went to stand in the window, his back to her. "My dancing days are over, I'm afraid," he said.

"Are you *sure* it's as bad as you think, Mr. Bob?" asked Nancy Lester. "Are you *sure* your doctor knows—that he is the best?"

Mr. Bob sighed wearily. "I think so. Anyhow I can't be tossing big fees to specialists,—not with a long life of helplessness before me. I'm not a Crœsus, you know, Annetta."

"Oh, but that mustn't make any difference now!" she cried.

"Unfortunately money always does make a difference," he told her bitterly. "But in this particular case I really doubt if it could do anything. You won't worry?"

"No," she told him stoutly. "I shall not worry. But I shall coöperate. I've told you about coöperation. I shall do all of it that I can, and you must let me. You must coöperate, too, if there's any way you can."

Even while they had been talking, Noticing Nancy Lester had swiftly planned the next step in her campaign. "Mr. Bob is poor—at least he's not rich. But Mother is rich; at least she always buys whatever she wants. He must go to all the best doctors in all the world. I shall ask my doctor who are the best. Mr. Bob must go to them all,

one after the other, until he finds the one who can help. We will send the new maid away, and have no parties and no new clothes, if necessary. And Mother must not mind painting a great many frumps from Pittsburgh, if the huge prices I have heard her say they pay to her will save Mr. Bob's eyes. And time is precious, I am sure. He must start to-night."

And so at tea-time, when Mrs. Lester always stopped working, Nancy sent Mr. Bob away. She was tired, she said. But next, instead of resting, she summoned her mother.

"Of course I'll arrange it," Mrs. Lester promised readily. "I wonder I didn't think to suggest something of the sort myself."

"Oh, you must not suggest!" amended Nancy. "You must insist! You must make him see that his eyes are worth more to us than almost anything. Promise me that you will make him go to-night!"

Mrs. Lester promised. "You'll be ill again, Annetta-Nancy, if you aren't careful," she warned. "You must try not to care so much."

"I will try," Nancy Lester promised meekly. "But if one didn't care tremendously—if one hadn't things to care about tremendously—wouldn't life be very stupid? It wouldn't *be* life."

And so Nancy Lester went to her first dance with a mind divided between girlish bliss over a filmy party-frock, a delightful escort, and the whole joyous prospect of her very first party, and sadness about Mr. Bob. He had gone to New York on the night designated by Nancy Lester, but it had taken both Annetta and Nancy, not to mention Mrs. Lester, to win his consent to the plan. Now he was waiting for an interview with the great specialist whom Nancy's doctor had recommended.

"Not much use running around among the rest," he had said. "Arkwright towers head and shoulders above 'em. After him,—well, there's a man in Vienna, and one in Switzerland—I forget the town. But if Arkwright told me there was no hope ——"

"Please find out about the Swiss doctor," Nancy Lester had interposed with determination.

Riding over to Fair Oaks with Peter Little, Nancy Lester talked shyly to him about their common friends, patted the big pink rose at the waist of her white and silver frock, and wondered if the Swiss doctor's address had been discovered. In the morning Mr. Bob was going to see Arkwright. Then he would know one man's verdict, and the European addresses might be needed at once.

"It's the funniest thing about this dance," Jane Learned told Nancy Lester, meeting her at the door of the gymnasium. "It's turned out to be more kinds of a thing! First it was just a senior dance, very plain, with war refreshments, mostly to exhibit Kitty Westervelt's Lewis. There he is now talking to Miss Marshall."

"Why is he better worth exhibiting than I?" demanded Peter Little gaily, and that had to be explained.

"Well," Jane went on with her story, "next the Godmothers' Association built their annex on to the senior dance idea, and turned it into the party of Nancy Lester's dreams. The godmothers were worried about the unfairylike war refreshments, but Chief Godmother N. Lee said they wouldn't matter at all, because things to eat always bore you."

"They don't bore me," broke in Peter Little.

"These may, when you see them," Jane informed him gaily. "I will now go on to my thirdly and lastly, dear friends. Thirdly and lastly, this party has turned itself into a grand celebration in honor of J. Learned and her short story that won the Prize Contest for Fair Oaks School. We've just heard about it, and I wanted to tell you two myself."

"Good for you, Jane!" cried Peter enthusiastically.

"Oh, Jane, I am so glad for you!" Nancy Lester told her. "Isn't it fine to be able to write? That's what I want to do more than anything, but I never can, I'm afraid. When Miss Dutton read my story in her class, my hopes were high. I've missed that class dreadfully since I've been ill. I meant to try so hard and learn so much!"

"See here, N. Lester." Into Jane's add-two-and-two mind had come a suspicion that was swiftly turning into certainty. "It was you wrote that story called 'The Actor Woman.'"

Nancy Lester smiled radiantly. "Oh, do you remember it, Jane? How proud you make me!"

"Noticing Nancy," said Jane solemnly, "there are some things you are very blind to."

A distressed expression spread over Nancy's little face; the word "blind" had reminded her of poor Mr. Bob. "Oh, Jane, was there something you wanted of me that I didn't see?" she asked anxiously.

"There was," Jane told her calmly. "I wanted of you the name of the author of that story. Didn't you understand, Noticing Nancy, that I was joking when I let the girls think I wrote it? Surely you didn't suppose I'd do anything worse than bluff them a little while for the fun of it?" Jane paused, frightened by the dazed look on Nancy Lester's face. "You—thought—I—lied about that

story on purpose—so the girls would choose me for the Story Contest," said Jane slowly.

More and more dazed grew Nancy Lester's face —dazed and troubled too; for the one thing that was plain to her was that somehow she had hurt Jane's feelings.

"I'm *very* sorry, Jane," she said humbly, "but nobody ever asked me if I wrote the story. And what you have just said, about joking and—and—all, I simply do not understand."

"Didn't you know that every one thought I wrote that story?" demanded Jane coldly. "Didn't you know that, because they thought so, the girls chose me as the school's special representative in the Short Story Contest? The prize story," she explained, "was my own. Oh, Christina helped a lot with it, and you helped, Noticing Nancy, though you didn't know it. But the story was honestly mine, and now I've won the Contest with it. But what is that, compared to having you think ——"

"I don't think anything about it but that you are a wonderful person, Jane dear," said Nancy Lester lovingly. "If the girls thought you wrote my story, I am all the more proud and glad. I meant to enter the Contest, but I was too busy even to remember it. And this is the first I have heard of our stories being confused. Some time

you must tell me everything, Jane dear; just as it happened, but to-night"—she smiled at Peter Little, whose foot was tapping time to the music—"to-night I want to dance."

Nancy Lester was the belle of the seniors' ball; the godmothers had seen to that. Godmothers can make a belle out of almost any girl, if they go at it skilfully enough; but Nancy Lester's case required very little management. She was so radiant, so cordial, she danced so beautifully; she could put shy boys at ease, make awkward ones feel graceful, and she amazed the few older men, like Kittie's Lewis, by her ready talk on all sorts of topics. When she was not dancing or talking, a sad, far-away look came into her eyes; even the joyous realization of her dearest wish could not keep her thoughts long from Mr. Bob.

"You get things so often in this world after you've stopped wanting them," she reflected sadly, as she undressed after the party. "Now, my dearest wish is all for Mr. Bob. No godmother can give me that one, alas! I wonder if Dr. Arkwright is magician enough to give it me. To-morrow—to-morrow we shall know." Unpinning the big pink roses at her waist, she cried a little, partly because her dearest wish had meant so little to her, and partly because she was afraid for Mr. Bob.

"I THOUGHT I WANT TO DANCE"

It was late the next day before she had any news. She had been sitting in the sun on the little side porch, hating to leave the house for her daily walk, for fear a message might come while she was away. Mrs. Lester had gone for a day's motoring with the Pittsburgh lady; Mary Ann was afraid of a telephone, and Nancy did not consider that Pauline could be trusted in so important a matter.

Sure enough, about five the telephone rang. It was Mr. Bob. "Are you there?" he cried jubilantly. "Alone, you say? Then come down the hill to meet me. I'm just leaving the Fair Oaks station."

Nancy Lester fairly flew down the road. His voice had sounded so happy; there must at least be some hope. She wished she had asked him, then was glad she had not; because he would have hated to give her bad news, and if the news was good, he would like to tell her in his own way. Then she saw him coming, striding toward her with a speed that made her haste seem mere loitering.

"Annetta-Nancy," he told her when they met, "I am not going blind. The operation and the three months in a dark room that I've got before me don't matter at all, because at the end of them there is to be light, not darkness. There is no

doubt or uncertainty, Arkwright says. I shall be as right as rain when the three months are up."

"How splendid!" cried the girl rapturously.

They had turned out into the country, and were on their favorite woodland road past Mrs. Brendon's place, walking, as they so often did, hand in hand.

"Annetta-Nancy," began Mr. Bob, "you are the one who is splendid—to have found out about Arkwright and made me go to him at once. Time is important, he says. So I'm off to-night for the operation. Tell Her Highness that after all I shan't need any money; I've got enough, now that I'm assured my active career can go on again presently."

"Oh, I'm so happy about it," sighed Nancy Lester.

"Even with my poor eyes, I can see that you are happy," he told her, "when you look at me like that. Annetta-Nancy, when the three months are up, will you marry me?"

Nancy Lester's eyes opened wide with astonishment. "Oh, Mr. Bob," she stammered, "how—how could I? There's my job—Mother, I mean, and the house, and —— It makes me very proud for you to ask me, Mr. Bob, but—but ——"

"Shirley will manage," he told her. "Nancy's illness has broken her in already to looking after

herself. And if she really needs anything, there will be two of us to look after her instead of one. But I—I want you every minute of every day, and your kind little heart surely can't make any man so miserable as I'm going to be if you say no to this. But the first thing to think of, dear," he added hastily, "is your own happiness. You must forget what I just said, and do exactly as you yourself wish,—just what will make you happiest."

She smiled up at him shyly. "Is it Annetta or Nancy that you want to marry?" she inquired demurely. "Because you may have either one. Both of them love you dearly, and are never so happy as when they are with you."

"I want them both," he answered quickly. "I've always adored Annetta, but it was Nancy I fell in love with. Annetta-Nancy, I've looked up the road and down, and there's no one coming."

What happened next is nobody's business but their own.

CHAPTER XVII

REALLY-TRULY FRIENDSHIP

"I AM engaged to be married," Nancy Lester told the little group of Fair Oaks girls gathered about the tea-table in the Lesters' yellow sitting-room. The four godmothers were there, of course, and Kittie, because she was engaged, and Plain Mary, because Nancy Lee had whispered in her namesake's ear how much Mary would enjoy it. Mrs. Lester was pouring the tea.

"I'm going to give up work and play about with my little girl as long as I have her with me," Mrs. Lester had said, in answer to Mary's shy expression of pleasure at meeting her.

Jane had wondered a little what Mrs. Lester meant. Now she knew.

"Yes, to Mr. Bob, of course," Nancy Lester answered her friends' excited questions. "Only he says I mustn't call him that now, because it makes him seem too old, or me too young, or something. We are to be married the minute he gets out of Dr. Arkwright's hospital—in midsummer that will be, we think. You see, our dearest wish is to be together, and the most magic way to have

one's wish come true is to have it come true right away, we think. And we hope, after that, to go to France. Mr. Bob—well, that's just a pet name for him, so why should he care?—says that France is the ideal place at present for a person like me, who notices things that need doing. He thinks I shall be quite distracted, in that war-stricken country, trying to help all the ones who need help. But I shall not be distracted, because I know now about coöperation. I shall just do my best, and then ask other people to help me do the rest of what needs doing. I wish you were going to be there, Jane and Nancy and Lloyd. Oh, and the others too, only Jane and Nancy and Lloyd have coöperated so beautifully, whenever I got into difficulties this winter."

Nancy Lee had been listening with eager attention to her namesake's recital. "Why, you are grown up, Nancy Lester!" she cried accusingly. "You are going to be married and to do war-relief work right at the front, and you don't act one bit flustered about it either!" She paused suddenly, and made a funny, wry face. "We are all grown up," she concluded abruptly.

Everybody laughed, and Jane informed the company that "a youth named Johnny Andrews" was responsible for Nancy Lee's aged feelings. "Yes, he was at the senior dance with her," she

explained to Mrs. Lester. "She can put it on the wedding-cards that she sends to the Fair Oaks girls: 'You've all seen him.'"

"Stop teasing, Jane," protested Nancy Lee. "Johnny's a nice boy and I've always known him, and that's all there is to it. What I meant about being grown up is this: last fall I came back meaning to study hard and get ready to live—ready to be grown up, that means. I knew it would be my last year of school, you see, and I didn't feel as if I knew anything at all. Well, I have studied hard, but somehow I've started to live, too, already. When I go home next week and take over the housekeeping, so that Mother can rest, I shan't think I'm doing anything so remarkable. Grown-up duties and responsibilities—why, this year has been just full of them!"

"That," said Jane wisely, "is because Miss Marshall understands, luckily for us, that education doesn't all come out of books. The practice we've had in cultivating 'the seeing eye,' which is another name for learning to think, and the fighting spirit, which is another name for pluck and earnestness and determination—that's what has made us feel grown up. That's what's going to make us worth-while women."

"I think I've grown up mostly by watching the others," chimed in little Christina. "I've always

watched Jane and then sort of copied her. But this year I watched—other people." Christina hesitated and then went on bravely. "Especially one other person. And I saw some beautiful things and some dreadful ones. It has all made me think hard and feel very serious. And now that I've got Jane back, it isn't the same as it used to be with us twins, because Jane's grown up. She does her hair neatly without my reminding her, and mends her own stockings."

There was another general laugh. "It's not that I don't love you better than ever, dearie," Jane explained, "but N. Lee here told me that I'd have to look out for myself before long, so I'm practicing. She said that cute little curly-haired girls always marry young."

"What a thing to say!" denied Christina indignantly. "And how about that note you got, Jane Learned? This dreadful war may end any time, now that we've gone into it, and then—you know what he said."

"Who's 'he,' and what did he say?" shrieked an excited chorus.

Jane grinned good-naturedly, and produced from the bulging pocket of her skirt a knife, an orange, a badly knit wristlet, designed for one of Uncle Sam's sailors, and finally a crumpled note. "It's too comical not to tell," she said, "so I'll read this

note to you. It's an answer to a nice, cheering little verse that I tucked down in the toe of one of my socks, where the censor and Miss MacPherson wouldn't see it. Miss Mac told me, you see, that my notes were lovely, but it was unladylike to sign 'em. But as for me, I'd rather be unladylike than anonymous and miss getting notes back. Hence this tale."

"Oh, please go on, Jane!" begged little Nancy Lester.

"Miss Mac was so impressed with the general appearance of my last socks," explained Jane, "that she overlooked the slightly bulging toes. Everybody overlooked 'em, until a soldier boy stuck his feet in. Here's his answer to my verse:

> "'Socks received—a dandy fit.
> I use one for a hammock and one for a mitt.
> Hope we meet when I've done my bit,
> But lady, *where* did you learn to knit?'"

Jane paused for applause and got it.

"There's more," she said, "like this. 'Dear old Jane, I composed the above lyric and having folded it and stuck it into an envelope, looked again at the address of the benevolent knitter and suddenly I saw light. Nobody but you, Jane, could have written that note and knit those socks. Both suit me down to the ground, Jane, just as

everything you ever did ——'" Jane crumpled the note hastily, and stuffed it back into her bulging pocket. "The rest is sort of private," she explained. "The point is, my old playmate, Bill Ames, got my socks."

"And the first time he can get out of his trench for long enough, he's coming to see Jane," put in little Christina. "That's our business, Jane, after the things you and Nancy Lee have said about me."

"Of course it's our business, Christina," cried Nancy Lee, whose romance Jane had also revealed. "Girls, I think Christina has seen through this growing up business better than any one."

"Sure she has," cried Jane. "Christina's clever, if her hair does curl. But just what has she seen?"

"How we learn the things that count from one another," said Nancy Lee. "I've learned things from all of you, but specially from Nancy Lester. That reminds me, Mrs. Lester, that ever since Easter I've had a message for you from my mother. She was surprised enough at Christmas time to find that my stockings were all mended up. 'What's come over my careless girl?' she asked me. So I told her that there was a girl at Fair Oaks who went to school and still kept house and did lots of other things for her mother; so I guessed

I could mend a few stockings. But this time when I came home I mended her stockings and made all the beds and arranged with Father about opening our cottage and keeping house and all. And she said, 'I wish you'd tell the mother of the girl who notices things and does them, that I can't thank her enough for her influence on my careless daughter.'"

"Oh, but I didn't bring up Annetta-Nancy to be the way she is," protested Mrs. Lester. "Your mother mustn't thank me. Besides, you've taught my little girl how to laugh. You've put the idea of fun into her. That's as important as a sense of responsibility."

"You can have time for fun if you understand about coöperation," observed Nancy Lester. "And that we learned from Jane. I've noticed," she concluded sagely, "that if you like a person and are friends with her, you can always learn something. I think that's really-truly friendship—giving something you have in you in exchange for something another has."

"Maybe it's friendship," agreed Jane. "Please note that it's also coöperation—the magic circle that gets things done and makes the world go round."

"I'm not going to be married," said Lloyd shyly, "nor go to war; and our Chinese cook

would hike for town in a hurry if I attempted to show him how to cut the high cost of living. But all the same I'm not outside Jane's magic circle. Mrs. Lester has just promised to bring Nancy out to our ranch this summer. I'm going to teach her riding, and she's going to give me sewing lessons."

"Mr. Bob won't let me come to see him while he's in the dark," explained Nancy Lester. "He thinks it would be all right for Annetta to come and see him, but he wants to keep Nancy, too, and he's sure it would make her feel blue. So Mother and I are going out to Lloyd's to ride and get tanned and strong and vigorous. But I shan't stay a minute longer than he makes me, Lloyd, no matter what fun we're having."

"There, Jane Somebody!" cried Mrs. Lester jubilantly. "There, Nancy Somebody! Smash goes your magic circle of coöperation! Smash goes 'really-truly friendship,' as Annetta calls it. And in comes love. That's growing up. And just as my prim, serious, capable girl had learned to play and we were planning all sorts of good times—in comes love." Then she smiled at them all, her most fascinating smile, and her voice grew very full of thrills. "Don't mind growing up, my dears. Love and war, hard work, splendid friendships, big responsibilities,—it's worth all that it costs,—specially love."

Nancy Lee hunted up the old Red Journal that night. For months she had been too busy to write in it, but now she had something to say. The Red Journal was full, up to the last page. Nancy Lee remembered, when she made this discovery, that she had meant to ask her father, who always encouraged her attempts at keeping a diary, to send her another volume in the Red Journal series. Now she was glad that she had forgotten to send; for this is what she wrote:

"This is the end of the Red Journals. I am grown up now, and if there are to be any more Journals they must be of a different color. Mrs. Lester says it is splendid to be grown up. Perhaps she thinks so because she is splendid herself. Of course I can't be like her (and in some ways I shouldn't want to be), but I am going to amount to something,—to be what Jane called a worth-while woman. I used to be just Miss I-Forgot Nancy. I'm not so bad as that now, and some day I hope to notice things to do like my namesake, and to have lots of grand ideas like Jane. Anyhow I can always coöperate—which means I can be friends. And if you are a friend you will have friends. Poor Grace! How hard she tried to make that rule work!

"Johnny Andrews is a nice boy but I'm not sure about love yet.

"Good-bye girlhood; welcome womanhood! (Miss Dutton would be pretty proud of that sentence.)

"NANCY LEE."

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